The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

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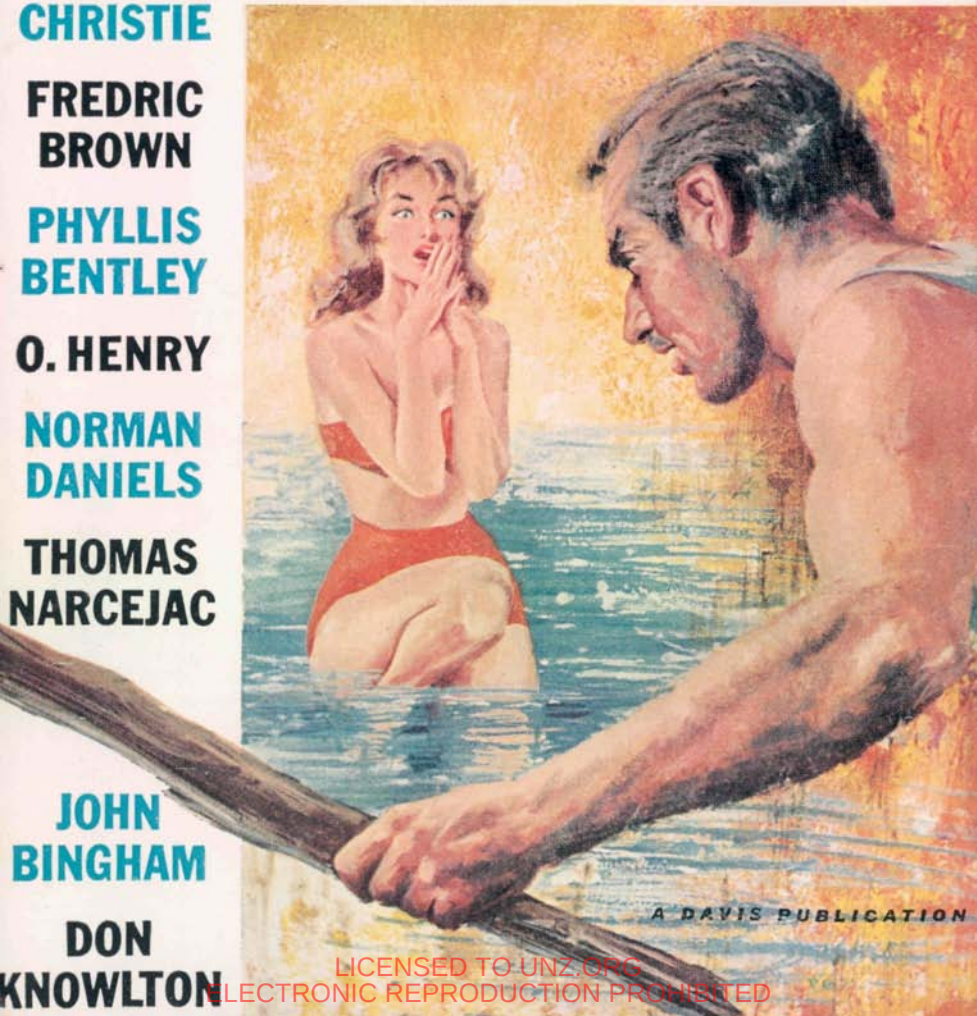

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S *Mystery Magazine*

***including* BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

Printed in 7 editions—American, Australian, English, French, Italian, Japanese, & Portuguese

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HUGH PENTECOST**

TITLE: ***The Man Inside***

TYPE: Mystery and Suspense

LOCALE: Lakeview, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Maybe he had good reason to go to pieces, but Ray Hammond had done more, the townspeople thought, than just break down. Now he was a dangerous man—murderous . . .*

YOU MIGHT CALL LAKEVIEW AN ordinary New England town inhabited by ordinary New England people. To say that would be to say something that sounds very simple but which, in reality, is quite complex. To say that an ordinary and simple man is anything but complex is to make an ignorant statement. To say that the character and personality of a town is ordinary is to admit that you have not scratched a half inch beneath the surface.

Lakeview has an elm-shaded main street, a half dozen stores, two garages, a firehouse, a small hospital, an area of summer homes, and an area of year-round homes lived in by "the natives." It has a lake, from which it takes its name, and thousands of acres of woodland creeping up its hillsides. The essence of its personality, which is the essence of all the personalities in it, is kindly, moral, industrious, and flavored by a wry twist of humor.

Like all small towns it has its "characters"—or in the modern vernacular, its "odd-balls."

On one bright, moonlit night two of these odd-balls hunted each other through the woods of Lakeview, one desperately trying to save a life, the other intent on grim justice that might well take a life. The town itself was an actor in the

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drama, with its kindliness, its morality, and its wry humor thrown to the winds.

In the end there was truth, and it was discovered without the help of the only two people who knew the truth.

It began in the late afternoon of an October day. The setting sun was turning the hills, with their oranges and reds and rich browns, ablaze with a final brilliance. A car drove up in front of Hector Trimble's pharmacy, and Sam Wilson, one of the local game wardens, got out and hurried around to the other side of the car. With difficulty he lifted something out and carried it across the sidewalk toward the store. It was the body of a twelve-year-old boy, lying limp and dead-looking in his arms.

Hector Trimble, the town druggist, was something of a comedy figure in Lakeview—pompous, self-righteous, and without a vestige of humor. People joked about the fact that he washed his hands twenty-five times a day, though they would certainly have complained if he and his prescription department had not been super-clean. He wouldn't allow his young son Joey to have any pets, lest cat or dog hairs find their way into a cough mixture. He had opinions, always vigorously expressed, on any subject you could name, but none of his opinions were noted for accuracy or depth of thought. He was a hard-working, saving man who did well by his wife and son, even though his notions of what might be accomplished at an international summit conference were a shade fantastic.

Sam Wilson carried the boy into Hector's store and faced the druggist across the rear counter.

"Your boy," Sam said, breathless. "I'm afraid he's hurt bad, Hector."

For all his pomposity and paternalistic tyranny, Hector Trimble loved his son more than anything else on earth. He opened his mouth and cried out, "Esther!"—and then came running around the counter to where Sam was holding his son.

"What happened?" Hector asked in a choking voice. "Hit by a car?"

Sam's face was dark with anger. "Ray Hammond," he said. "He'd have killed the boy then and there if I hadn't happened to show up."

"Hammond!" Hector whispered. He'd lifted Joey's head so that it didn't hang down. His shaking fingers stroked the boy's pale, dirt-stained cheek. "Only today he was making threats!" Two big tears ran down Hector's cheeks. "Joey!" he said softly. "Joey!" He raised terrified eyes to Sam Wilson.

"He's hurt bad. You better get Doc Merrit."

Then Esther Trimble was there, tall, gray, gaunt-looking, with warm gray eyes. Without a word she took her son out of Sam's arms and carried him back into the living quarters at the rear of the store.

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Hector dithered with the dial phone back of the counter and finally called the operator and asked for Doc Merrit. "Emergency," he shouted. He went back to the living quarters with Sam at his heels. The game warden had to talk now.

"I was looking for some traps I knew the kids had put out," he said. "Over back of Zabriskie's sawmill. I heard Joey scream. By the time I could get over the rise of the hill, I saw him running across the clearing like the devil was after him. And he was! Ray Hammond! Just as I got there, Hammond pounced on Joey and they both went down, arms and legs flailing. I shouted at Hammond and he turned his head to look at me. Like a wild animal, he was! He jumped up and started to run. I yelled at him to stop, and when he didn't—well, I took a shot at him. Winged him in the shoulder, I think. He went down, but he scrambled right up again and ran off. It was go after him or take care of Joey."

"I told you!" Hector said to his wife, accusingly. "I told you!"

Esther ignored him. She had put Joey down on his own bed, and she was wiping his scratched and dirt-caked face with a damp cloth. "We're grateful to you, Sam," she said.

"Hammond should never have been let out!" Hector fumed. "I always said he was a dangerous man—murderous. By heaven, if Joey dies—"

"Hush, Hector," Esther said gently. "Just make sure the operator got hold of Doc Merrit."

Hector went back to the phone. Sam turned to follow him. "I'm going to get Sheriff Egan and some of the boys and we'll track Hammond down, Mrs. Trimble," he said. "Hector's right. The man's a homicidal maniac. It might have been my kid—or anybody else's."

"He should be found if he's hurt," Esther said. "Sam?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"He really attacked Joey?"

"Holy smoke, Mrs. Trimble. I saw it with my own eyes. It was the most vicious thing I ever saw."

Esther stroked her son's pale face with the cloth. "Let George know about it, won't you?"

"You bet!" Sam said. "When George hears that Hammond laid hands on the boy he'll crucify him. He loves Joey like he was his own."

"Just let him know," Esther said.

The Hammond story had jarred the town of Lakeview just about fifteen months ago. Ray Hammond and his wife had come to live there as "summer folks" about two years before that. Hammond was an artist—a painter. He obviously had money, judging from the house he bought and the $12,000 sports car in which he whirled around town. And Sandra Hammond's clothes must have cost a fortune.

Not that Sandra needed clothes to make you look at her. She was

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about the most glamorous woman Lakeview had ever seen. And she was gay, laughing, good-natured—friendly with everyone.

Lakeview is like other towns of its kind when it comes to "outsiders." It reserves acceptance. It doesn't go all out to make friends with new people. But the tradespeople just couldn't help breaking a leg to do whatever Sandra Hammond asked, and Ray made it faster than most strangers do. He knew a lot about things that concerned the men of Lakeview. He was a first-rate fisherman; he handled a gun in the woods as if he'd been born to it. He wasn't pushy. And when Uncle George Crowder asked Ray to go hunting with him that second fall, Ray Hammond had it made.

And just when he had it made, Ray Hammond's world fell apart.

Ray and his wife had gone over to Clayton, the next town, to a movie. It was December and an early snowstorm had turned to sleet. By the time they started home from the movie, the roads were coated with ice. They were driving back along the dugway in their sports car—fast, maybe, but not sensationally—when they skidded, smashed through the guard rail, and plunged into the lake.

Ray was thrown clear but Sandra was pinned in the car which sank in forty feet of icy water. Ray was found half dead by Ed Skidmore—Ray was diving in the black, cold water, trying to find his Sandra.

Tragedy has a way of warming people, and everyone in town tried to make his awful loss easier for Ray. But nothing helped—he blamed himself. He took to drinking heavily, and couldn't bear to be alone in the house where he and Sandra had lived. He couldn't paint. All he could do was try to forget.

It wasn't long before Ray Hammond was a bad drunk who picked fights. When the torture inside him got too great it exploded, and he'd start to smash up whatever place he was in. People put up with it because they felt sorry for him. But the truth was, tavernkeepers began to dread his coming, and good friends, like the Potters, prayed they wouldn't hear his car in their driveway.

Uncle George Crowder was the only friend who didn't avoid him. Uncle George was Esther Trimble's brother and Joey Trimble's uncle. Uncle George, gaunt and gray like his sister, had lived through his own tragedy, and some of its outlines were similar to Ray Hammond's.

George Crowder had been a brilliant young lawyer with a thriving practice in Lakeview. He had political aspirations and became county prosecutor with, as everyone knew, his eye on the Governor's mansion one of these days. Ten years ago George Crowder had prosecuted a man for first degree murder, got his conviction, and seen the man hanged at Weathers-

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field. Some months later it was proved, incontrovertibly, that the man had been innocent.

George Crowder had cracked wide open. He resigned his public office, closed up his practice, and disappeared from Lakeview. People said he was drinking himself to death. Then after ten years George Crowder reappeared in town. He'd aged more than ten years. He was quiet, gentle, aloof. Whatever his drinking history was, it now lay behind him.

He built himself a shack in the woods and settled down to live there with his setter dog, Timmy. He was the best man with a gun and dog for miles around. Much to Hector Trimble's disgust, he became a sort of hero to Joey who never stopped talking about his Uncle George, and soon everyone in town called him "Uncle George."

As a mentor and companion, Uncle George was all the things Hector wasn't. Joey could now handle a dog in the field with the best professionals, thanks to Uncle George. He could outfish the old-timers, thanks to Uncle George. And most of all Joey had developed a tolerance and understanding amazing for his age—thanks to Uncle George.

In Ray Hammond's trouble, Uncle George stood resolutely by until the big blow-off. And then nobody could help Ray—not even with Uncle George representing him in court.

One agonizing afternoon Ray had been down at the swimming place at the north end of the lake. Beyond any question he was drunk. Kids are pretty cruel sometimes, and the local kids saw Ray as a comic figure when he stumbled along the main street, or started shouting at someone for no apparent reason.

This day a group of them were swimming nearby and young Tommy Skidmore invented a song. He sang it loud enough for Ray to hear.

"Good old Ray, good old Ray,
Up and killed his wife one day.
How did it happen? No one can say
Except good old drunken, drunken Ray."

When Hammond heard that chanting he went completely berserk. His muscular reflexes were galvanized by the acid of despair. There was a canoe paddle on the beach and he grabbed it and sprang to his feet. He waded into those kids—nine-, ten-, twelve-year-olds. Tommy Skidmore's scalp was laid open, and he might have been killed if some grownups hadn't come running and thrown Ray to the ground and held him there, screaming his fury.

He was sentenced to three years in jail. Uncle George did the best he could for him and later handled his appeal for parole. The parole was granted after fourteen months, on condition Ray never took a

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drink and was never involved in any kind of violence or disorderly conduct.

Uncle George was at the Post Office five getting his mail when Sam Wilson appeared, looking for Sheriff Red Egan who had an office in the same building. By this time Sam had worked himself into a kind of frenzy. He blurted out his story.

"And that's the way he repays you for helping him, George!" Sam shouted. "We gotta get him before he murders some other kids."

It was like a fever starting. You could hear angry voices beginning to relay the tale. Uncle George, rigid as a statue, suddenly gave a little signal to Timmy, his dog. Timmy jumped up onto the seat of Uncle George's Jeep, and the old man drove quickly down the street to the drug store.

The ambulance from the hospital was there. Doc Merrit had been prompt. He met Uncle George at the entrance to the store and answered the question in Uncle George's pale-blue eyes.

"Concussion," he said. "How bad I can't tell till I can take x-rays. Maybe broken ribs, internal injuries. What the hell sent Hammond off like that, George? He's sick—dangerously sick!"

Uncle George, his face looking as if it had been carved out of stone, went back to his Jeep. He walked around to the rear, took out a rifle, and flipped open the magazine.

"George!"

It was Esther Trimble, his sister. She was on her way to follow the ambulance to the hospital. Hector and one of the hospital interns were carrying the stretcher out of the store with Joey's limp body on it.

"There are a couple of things you ought to know, George," Esther Trimble said.

The old man turned to look at her. His eyes could be warm and dancing with humor; now they were as cold as two newly minted dimes.

"What's to know? He did that to Joey," Uncle George said, nodding toward the stretcher.

"They'll hunt him down and kill him," Esther said. "I saw it in Sam Wilson's eyes. I see it in yours. They won't give him a chance."

"He's had his chance," Uncle George said. "By God, Esther, it's your own boy he attacked!"

"You made a mistake once, George," Esther said steadily. "You didn't have all the facts then. You don't have them now."

A nerve twitched in Uncle George's cheek. "What facts?" he asked quietly.

"Joey was walking along the highway near the junction with the dugway this morning," Esther said. "He saw Mr. Hammond lying in a ditch beside the road. He thought he was drunk. His eyes were closed. So Joey went to the Potters to get help for him. The Potters are Mr. Hammond's best friends

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in town. Bess Potter hurried back to where Joey said Mr. Hammond was —and found him still there. But he wasn't drunk, George. He was cold sober. He'd been waiting there for Buck Thornton to drive him in to Clayton. He doesn't have a driver's license himself, you know."

"So?"

"So Mr. Hammond was pretty steamed up when he learned from Bess that Joey'd said he was drunk. That would have been breaking his parole, wouldn't it, George? He'd have had to go back to prison, wouldn't he?"

Uncle George nodded.

"So Mr. Hammond came over here in a towering rage. We'd just finished dinner and Joey was out back somewhere. Mr. Hammond said if Joey spread any more lies about him he'd—well, he'd thrash Joey good, he said. Hector started shouting at him. I pointed out to him that Joey hadn't spread the story. He'd gone to friends of Mr. Hammond's. He hadn't even told us at dinner. I said I thought Joey had been acting as a friend. Mr. Hammond just stared at me, then he slammed the door and I saw him go hurrying off down the street."

"That's all?" Uncle George asked.

"That's all," Esther said.

"Until he attacked Joey in the woods," Uncle George said grimly.

"Yes, George. But I thought you ought to know."

Red Egan owned a couple of bloodhounds. They were a kind of hobby with him, and they'd never been used for any kind of police work—except one time when the Dakin girl was lost in the woods for forty-eight hours. The bloodhounds found the little girl, and Red was very proud of them.

He had them in the clearing now back of Zabriskie's sawmill. Sam Wilson, Ed Skidmore, and a dozen other grim-faced men were there, all armed with rifles or shotguns. Sam was showing Red Egan where Ray Hammond had dropped after he'd winged him. There was blood on the brown carpet of fallen leaves. The bloodhounds were brought up and they bayed cheerfully.

"Should be an easy trail for them to follow," Sam said. "Looks like he's losing a lot of blood."

"I hope so," Red said. "Going to be dark in another fifteen minutes."

"Not so dark. Full moon about then," Skidmore said. "We'll get him!"

They turned at the sound of a car. It was Uncle George's Jeep. He parked it at the edge of the clearing and came toward the men, gun crooked under his arm, Timmy walking quietly at heel.

"Any news?" Sam asked him.

"Head injuries, maybe internal injuries," Uncle George said in a short of absent-minded way. "Can't tell how bad till they take x-rays."

"That lunatic!" Ed Skidmore said. "Let's get going."

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The two bloodhounds strained forward against their chains, pulling Red Egan behind them. The men followed, peering into the darkening shadows. Timmy, panting slightly with excitement, nevertheless stayed at Uncle George's heel.

The trail told its own story. Hammond had had no particular objective at first except to get away. He'd zigzagged back and forth, doubling around on himself. They came to a place where he'd evidently fallen and rested a while, because there was considerable blood over a matted portion of leaves.

"You must have winged him pretty good, Sam," Red Egan said.

"Not good enough!" Sam growled.

Night fell, but the woods were streaked with moonlight. The bloodhounds pushed forward at a steady pace, following the winding trail. Once they saw where Hammond had fallen again and rolled down into a little gully. But again the wounded man had picked himself up and gone on.

Uncle George, his chin sunk forward on his chest, a deep frown creasing his forehead, was walking at the rear of the group of manhunters. Suddenly an unusual thing happened. Timmy, who would never move from heel without permission, strayed off to the right. Uncle George heard him whimper and turned his head. He signaled Timmy to come back to heel, but the dog took two steps farther on, looking back at Uncle George.

Now Uncle George had once remarked that there were only three things in which he believed without question: the Constitution and Bill of Rights of the United States, the existence of some kind of Divine Creator who had made the woods he loved to walk in, and the infallibility of his dog, Timmy.

When you believe in something you go along with it. Uncle George started after Timmy and the dog immediately continued on his path off to the right. Uncle George had been following the hunt without paying too much attention to where he was. He suddenly realized that his own isolated cabin was only about a hundred yards in the direction Timmy was headed.

"If you're taking me home just to get fed," Uncle George muttered, "so help me I'll get me another dog!"

He should have known better—and really did, or he wouldn't have followed his dog. It was almost like daylight in the clearing in front of the cabin, the moon was so bright. Uncle George had only taken a few steps across the cleared area when he saw the figure of a man sprawled face down on the little porch outside George's front door.

Ray Hammond lay there, unconscious. Timmy growled at the smell of blood which Uncle George could

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see lying in a wide pool under the man's body and soaking through the shoulder of his shirt. Hammond's right hand, crooked like the talons of a bird, had been clawing at the door to the cabin when he passed out.

"Good boy," Uncle George said, and Timmy gave his tail one gratified swish.

Uncle George knelt beside Ray Hammond and felt for a pulse. It was there, but feathery light, frighteningly irregular. Uncle George raised his head. Red Egan's bloodhounds were very close, baying happily.

And then the hounds, followed by Red and the other hunters, burst into the clearing.

"George's got him!" Sam Wilson shouted.

Uncle George stood up, gun crooked under his arm. The ring of faces, two steps down from him, was triumphant.

"He's lost a lot of blood," Uncle George said. "One of you beat it back to town for Doc Merrit, and have the ambulance come up the logging road as far as it can. We'll make a litter and carry him down. Meanwhile I'll need help trying to stop the bleeding."

"You crazy?" Ed Skidmore said. "He nearly killed my kid a year ago, now Joey. Let him die! It'll save the State paying for his keep the rest of his life."

"Somebody start after Doc," Uncle George said.

Nobody moved.

That moonlight shone full on the old man with the gun crooked under his arm as he stood two steps above them. He looked like a figure in a stage play, with the backdrop of the dark cabin, and the still, bloodsoaked figure at his feet.

"I made a mistake once," Uncle George said. "On account of that mistake a man was hanged. You know what I did wrong? I didn't bother to get inside him. To understand a man you've got to get inside him—think his thoughts—get his way."

"You gone crazy, George?" Ed Skidmore demanded again. "What are you talking about? That guy tried to kill your Joey!"

"Did he?" Uncle George said softly. "Ever since we started hunting him I've been trying to get inside Ray Hammond—trying to think the way he was thinking, trying to guess how he would act. I think I managed to get inside him, and I think I can tell you what happened today. Now listen to me, and after that I'm going to help this man. And if anyone tries to stop me he's going to have to shoot quicker and straighter than I do."

"We're listening, George," Red Egan said. He'd known Uncle George for a long time and listening to him had never been unprofitable.

Uncle George was staring out over the tops of the heads below

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him. "I haven't had a drink all the time I was in jail," he said in a strangely different voice. "I'm a man who likes the woods and the outdoors, and jail has been hell. Freedom is all I want. But the world is hollow and meaningless—with my wife gone. It's like a kid learning to walk. It's all strange, and full of rules. I live day by day, moment by moment. Little things are important and difficult to come by. Like going into Clayton for the special pipe tobacco I like.

"So I make a careful arrangement to meet someone who'll drive me in. Buck Thornton will pick me up at the highway junction. I get there early because there's nothing else to do, and I lie down on the grass and close my eyes against the sun. I lie there thinking of what's lost forever, and aching inside.

"I don't even see little Joey Trimble come along and stop a few yards away to stare at me—lying there. I don't hear him hurry off. Presently Bess Potter shows up—anxious and worried. It comes out that she thinks I'm drunk, that little Joey Trimble had told her so.

"I feel like no other man on earth would feel. Others might be just angry with a kid for spreading such a story—but to me it's a matter of life and death. That story could send me back into a cage for two more unbearable years. I'm half wild with fear at the thought of it. I go running to the Trimble place and I tell the boy's parents that if he spreads that story I'll tan the hide off him.

"And all the time the father is screaming at me that I ought to be back in my cage. Then the mother speaks—and she's quiet and I see a kind of sympathy in her. The boy went to the Potters, my friends, didn't he? He could have gone to Sheriff Egan's office instead. The boy hadn't even mentioned it at home. She says she thinks the boy acted as a friend. He's a good kid, I remember. He's George Crowder's nephew and he has something of the old man's sympathy for an underdog.

"So I go out in the woods to calm down and think things over. I always feel more at peace in the woods. All of a sudden I see the boy across the way from me. A good kid who'd acted as my friend. I wanted to thank him. Not too many people have acted as friends to me. So I call out to him." Uncle George's voice was suddenly a trifle unsteady. "The boy looks at me in terror. Poor kid, he probably heard me threatening to beat him up. I call out again—and he starts to run!

"God Almighty, do you know what that means? He'll say I tried to harm him and I'll be sent back to the cage! I've got to stop him—to make him understand. 'Joey! Wait!' I shout at him. But he cries out in fear and runs with all his might.

"I have to stop him. You see that,

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don't you? I have to make it clear to him. So I take out after him, yelling at him to stop. Then, just when I'm right behind him, he trips over something and falls—and before I can stop myself I fall on top of him. And there's Sam Wilson, shouting and waving a gun.

"I can't think of anything now but flight—so I run. Sam Wilson shoots me in the shoulder and the impact knocks me down—but I pick myself up and run again. Run and run—don't you see? All I wanted to do was tell the kid I was grateful. But no one will believe it. No one!"

Uncle George was silent for a long moment. Then he lowered his pale blue eyes to took at Sam Wilson. "It could have happened that way, couldn't it, Sam? The boy tripped and fell and Hammond fell on top of him? Couldn't it have been that way?"

Sam Wilson hesitated. "Yes, I guess it could, George," he said slowly. "I was so sure he was after the boy to harm him that I never thought of it any other way."

"Try to get *inside* Ray Hammond, to think with *his* mind and act with *his* body," Uncle George said. "I can't make it come out any other way. I can't make myself run after little Joey with violence in my heart. I can only feel fear and the desperate need to explain to the boy." He looked down at the still figure at his feet.

"Knowing how I feel about Joey," Uncle George asked, "would he have come here to me for help if he'd really meant to harm the boy?"

There was a moment of silence and then Red Egan spoke. "Sam, you hightail it into town for Doc Merrit and the ambulance." He raised his homely face to Uncle George. "You got any sheets or stuff in there we can make bandages out of, George? That guy needs help—and fast!"

●

We need your editorial advice—

Half of our editorial staff would like to include a Readers' Column in *EQMM;* the other half would rather continue to devote maximum space to fiction. Which is your preference? We would be deeply grateful for your post-card votes, addressed to Ellery Queen, 527 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N.Y.

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Miss Marple did not disapprove of talking scandal. How often, she said, the tittle-tattle of gossip proved true! Then, too, the old women who indulged in idle (or not so idle) talk about others were "what one might call experts." In her own way, of course, Miss Marple was the most expert of all . . .

NEVER TWO WITHOUT THREE; *or,* *A Christmas Tragedy*

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"I HAVE A COMPLAINT TO MAKE," said Sir Henry Clithering.

His eyes twinkled gently as he looked round at the assembled company. Colonel Bantry, his legs stretched out, was frowning at the mantelpiece as though it were a delinquent soldier on parade; his wife was surreptitiously glancing at a catalogue of bulbs which had come by the late post; Dr. Lloyd was gazing with frank admiration at Jane Helier, and that beautiful young actress herself was thoughtfully regarding her pink polished nails. Only the elderly spinster lady, Miss Marple, was sitting bolt upright, and her faded blue eyes met Sir Henry's with an answering twinkle.

"A complaint?" she murmured.

"A very serious complaint. We are a company of six, three representatives of each sex, and I protest on behalf of down-trodden males. We have had three stories told thus far—and told by the three men! I protest that the ladies have not done their fair share."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Bantry with indignation. "I'm sure we have. We've listened with the most intelligent appreciation. We've displayed the true womanly attitude."

"It's an excellent excuse," said Sir Henry, "but it won't do. And there's a very good precedent in the Arabian Nights! So, forward, Scheherazade!"

"Meaning me?" said Mrs. Bantry. "But I don't know anything to tell. I've never been surrounded by blood or mystery."

"I don't absolutely insist on blood," said Sir Henry. "But I'm sure one of you three ladies has got a pet mystery. Come now, Miss Marple—'The Curious Coincidence of the Charwoman' or 'The Mystery of the Mothers' Meeting.'"

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Nothing that would interest you, Sir Henry. We have our little mysteries, of course—there was that

From "The Tuesday Club Murders," © 1928, 1929, 1930 and 1933 by Agatha Christie

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gill of pickled shrimps that disappeared so incomprehensibly; but that wouldn't interest you because it all turned out to be so trivial, though throwing a considerable light on human nature."

"You have taught me to dote on human nature," said Sir Henry solemnly.

"What about you, Miss Helier?" asked Colonel Bantry. "You must have had some interesting experiences."

"Yes, indeed," said Dr. Lloyd.

"Me?" said Jane. "You mean—you want me to tell you something that happened to me?"

"Or to one of your friends," amended Sir Henry.

"Oh!" said Jane vaguely, "I don't think anything has ever happened to me—I mean not that kind of thing. Flowers, of course, and queer messages—but that's just men, isn't it? I don't think"—she paused and appeared lost in thought.

"I see we shall have to have that epic of the shrimps," said Sir Henry. "Now then, Miss Marple."

"You're so fond of your joke, Sir Henry. The shrimps are only nonsense; but now I come to think of it, I *do* remember one incident—at least not exactly an incident, something very much more serious—a tragedy. And I was, in a way, mixed up in it; and for what I did, I have never had any regrets—no, no regrets at all. But it didn't happen in St. Mary Mead."

"That disappoints me," said Sir Henry. "But I will endeavor to bear up. I knew we should not rely on you in vain."

He settled himself in the attitude of a listener. Miss Marple grew slightly pink.

"I hope I shall be able to tell it properly," she said anxiously. "I fear I am very inclined to become *rambling*. One wanders from the point—altogether without knowing that one is doing so. And it is so hard to remember each fact in its proper order. You must all bear with me if I tell my story badly. It happened a very long time ago now. As I say, it was not connected with St. Mary Mead. As a matter of fact, it had to do with a Hydro—"

"Do you mean a seaplane?" asked Jane with wide eyes.

"You wouldn't know, dear," said Mrs. Bantry, and explained.

Her husband added his quota. "Beastly places—absolutely beastly! Got to get up early and drink filthy-tasting water. Lot of old women sitting about. Ill-natured tittle-tattle. God, when I think—"

"Now, Arthur," said Mrs. Bantry placidly. "You know it did you all the good in the world."

"Lot of old women always sitting round talking scandal," grunted Colonel Bantry.

"That, I am afraid, is true," said Miss Marple. "I myself—"

"My dear Miss Marple," cried the colonel, horrified. "I didn't mean—"

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With pink cheeks and a little gesture of the hand, Miss Marple stopped him.

"But it is *true,* Colonel Bantry. Only I should just like to say this. Let me recollect my thoughts. Yes. Talking scandal, as you say—well, it *is* done a good deal. And people are very down on it—especially young people. My nephew, who writes books—and very clever ones, I believe—has said some most *scathing* things about taking people's characters away without any kind of proof—and how wicked it is, and all that.

"But what I say is that none of these young people ever stop to *think*. They really don't examine the facts. Surely the whole crux of the matter is this: *How often is tittle-tattle*—as you call it—*true!* And I think if, as I say, they really examined the facts they would find that it was true nine times out of ten! That's really just what makes people so annoyed about it."

"The inspired guess," said Sir Henry.

"No, not that, not that at all! It's really a matter of practice and experience. An Egyptologist, so I've heard, if you show him one of those curious little beetles, can tell you by the look and the feel of the thing what date B.C. it is, or if it's a Birmingham imitation. And he can't always give a definite rule for doing so. He just *knows*. His life has been spent handling such things.

"And that's what I'm trying to say—very badly, I know. What my nephew calls 'superfluous women' have a lot of time on their hands, and their chief interest is usually *people*. And so, you see, they get to be what one might call *experts*.

"Now young people nowadays—they talk very freely about things that weren't mentioned in my young days, but on the other hand their minds are terribly innocent. They believe in everyone and everything. And if one tries to warn them, ever so gently, they say that one has a Victorian mind—and that, they say, is like a *sink*."

"After all," said Sir Henry, "what is wrong with a *sink?*"

"Exactly," said Miss Marple eagerly. "It's the most necessary thing in any house—but, of course, not romantic. Now I must confess that I have my *feelings,* like everyone else, and I have sometimes been cruelly hurt by unthinking remarks. I know gentlemen are not interested in domestic matters, but I must just mention my maid Ethel—a very good-looking girl and obliging in every way.

"Now I realized as soon as I saw her that she was the same type as Annie Webb and poor Mrs. Bruitt's girl. If the opportunity arose *mine and thine* would mean nothing to her. So I let her go at the end of the month and I gave her a written reference saying she was honest and sober, but privately I warned old Mrs. Edwards against taking

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her; and my nephew, Raymond, was exceedingly angry and said he had never heard of anything so wicked—yes, *wicked*.

"Well, she went to Lady Ashton, whom I felt no obligation to warn—and what happened? All the lace cut off her underclothes and two diamond brooches taken—and the girl departed in the middle of the night and never heard of since!"

Miss Marple paused, drew a long breath, and then went on.

"You'll be saying this has nothing to do with what went on at Keston Spa Hydro—but it has in a way. It explains why I felt no doubt in my mind the first moment I saw the Sanderses together that he meant to do away with her."

"Eh?" said Sir Henry, leaning forward.

Miss Marple turned a placid face to him.

"As I say, Sir Henry, I felt no doubt in my own mind. Mr. Saunders was a big, good-looking, florid-faced man, very hearty in his manner and popular with all. And nobody could have been pleasanter to his wife than he was. But I *knew!* He meant to make away with her."

"My dear Miss Marple—"

"Yes, I know. That's what my nephew Raymond West, would say. He'd tell me I hadn't a shadow of proof. But I remember Walter Hones, who kept The Green Man. Walking home with his wife one night she fell into the river—and *he* collected the insurance money! And one or two other people that are walking about scot-free to this day—one indeed in our own class of life. Went to Switzerland for a summer holiday climbing with his wife. I warned her not to go—the poor dear didn't get angry with me as she might have done—she only laughed. It seemed to her funny that a queer old thing like me should say such things about her Harry. Well, there was an accident—and Harry is married to another woman now. But what could I *do?* I *knew,* but there was no proof."

"Oh, Miss Marple," cried Mrs. Bantry. "You don't really mean—"

"My dear, these things are very common—very common indeed. And gentlemen are especially tempted, being so much the stronger. So easy if a thing looks like an accident. As I say, I knew at once with the Sanderses. It was on a tram. It was full inside and I had had to go on top. We all three got up to get off and Mr. Sanders lost his balance and fell right against his wife, sending her headfirst down the stairs. Fortunately the conductor was a very strong young man and caught her."

"But surely that must have been an accident."

"Of course it was an accident—nothing could have looked more accidental. But Mr. Sanders had been in the Merchant Service, so he told me, and a man who can keep

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his balance on a nasty tilting boat doesn't lose it on top of a tram if an old woman like me doesn't. Don't tell *me!*"

"At any rate we can take it that you made up your mind, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry. "Made it up then and there."

The old lady nodded. "I was sure enough, and another incident in crossing the street not long afterwards made me surer still. Now I ask you, what could I do, Sir Henry? Here was a nice contented happy little married woman shortly going to be murdered."

"My dear lady, you take my breath away."

"That's because, like most people nowadays, you won't face facts. You prefer to think such a thing couldn't be. But it was so, and I knew it. But one is so sadly handicapped! I couldn't, for instance, go to the police. And to warn the young woman would, I could see, be useless. She was devoted to the man. I just made it my business to find out as much as I could about them.

"One has a lot of opportunities, doing one's needlework round the fire. Mrs. Sanders—Gladys, her name was—was only too willing to talk. It seems they had not been married very long. Her husband had some property that was coming to him, but for the moment they were very badly off. In fact, they were living on her little income. One has heard that tale before. She bemoaned the fact that she could not touch the capital. It seems that somebody had had some sense somewhere!

"But the money was hers to will away—I found that out. And she and her husband had made wills in favor of each other directly after their marriage. Very touching. Of course, when Jack's affairs came right—That was the burden all day long, and in the meantime they were very hard up indeed—actually had a room on the top floor, all among the servants—and so dangerous in case of fire, though, as it happened, there was a fire escape just outside their window. I inquired carefully if there was a balcony—dangerous things, balconies. One push, you know!

"I made her promise not to go out on the balcony—I said I'd had a dream. That impressed her—one can do a lot with superstition sometimes. She was a fair girl, rather washed-out complexion, and an untiny roll of hair on her neck. Very credulous. She repeated what I had said to her husband and I noticed him looking at me in a curious way once or twice. *He* wasn't credulous, and he knew I'd been on that tram.

"But I was very worried—terribly worried—because I couldn't see how to circumvent him. I could prevent anything happening at the Hydro, just by saying a few words to show him I suspected. But that only meant his putting off his plan

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till later. No, I began to believe that the only policy was a bold one—somehow or other to lay a trap for him. If I could induce him to attempt her life in a way of my own choosing—well, then he would be unmasked, and she would be forced to face the truth however much of a shock it was to her."

"'You take my breath away," said Dr. Lloyd. "What conceivable plan could you adopt?"

"I'd have found one—never fear," said Miss Marple. "But the man was too clever for me. He didn't wait. He thought I might suspect, so he struck before I could be sure. He knew I would suspect an accident. So he made it murder."

A little gasp went round the circle. Miss Marple nodded and set her lips grimly together.

"I'm afraid I've put that rather abruptly. I must try and tell you exactly what occurred. I've always felt very bitterly about it—it seems to me that I ought, somehow, to have prevented it. But doubtless Providence knew best. I did what I could at all events.

"There was what I can only describe as a curiously eerie feeling in the air. There seemed to be something weighing on us all—a feeling of misfortune. To begin with, there was George, the hall porter. Had been there for years and knew everybody. Bronchitis and pneumonia, and passed away on the fourth day. Terribly sad. A real blow to everybody. And four days before Christmas too. And then one of the housemaids—such a nice girl—a septic finger, actually died in twenty-four hours.

"I was in the drawing-room with Miss Trollope and old Mrs. Carpenter, and Mrs. Carpenter was being positively ghoulish—relishing it all, you know.

"'Mark my words,' she said. *'This isn't the end.* You know the saying? *Never two without three.* I've proved it true time and again. There'll be another death. Not a doubt of it. And we shan't have long to wait. *Never two without three.'*

"As she said the last words, nodding her head and clicking her knitting needles, I just chanced to look up and there was Mr. Sanders standing in the doorway. Just for a minute he was off guard and I saw the look in his face as plain as plain. I shall believe till my dying day that it was Mrs. Carpenter's ghoulish words that put the whole thing into his head. I saw his mind working.

"He came forward into the room smiling in his genial way.

"'Any Christmas shopping I can do for you ladies?' he asked. 'I'm going down to Keston presently.'

"He stayed a minute or two, laughing and talking, and then went out. I tell you I was troubled, and I said straight away, 'Where's Mrs. Sanders?'"

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"Mrs. Trollope said she'd gone out to some friends of hers, the Mortimers, to play bridge, and that eased my mind for the moment. But I was still very worried and just on half-past five, I remember. Now I'm very anxious to put clearly what happened next. I was still in the lounge at a quarter to seven when Mr. Sanders came in. There were two gentlemen with him and all three of them were inclined to be a little on the lively side. Mr. Sanders left his two friends and came right over to where I was sitting with Miss Trollope. He explained that he wanted our advice about a Christmas present he was giving his wife. It was an evening bag.

"'And you see, ladies,' he said. 'I'm only a rough sailorman. What do I know about such things? I've had three sent to me on approval and I want an expert opinion on them.'

"We said, of course, that we would be delighted to help him, and he asked if we'd mind coming upstairs, as his wife might come in any minute if he brought the things down. So we went up with him. I shall never forget what happened next—I can feel my little fingers tingling now.

"Mr. Sanders opened the door of the bedroom and switched on the light. I don't know which of us saw it first . . .

"Mrs. Sanders was lying on the floor, face downwards—dead.

"I got to her first. I knelt down and took her hand and felt for the pulse, but it was useless—the arm itself was cold and stiff. Just by her head was a stocking filled with sand—the weapon she had been struck down with.

"Miss Trollope, silly creature, was moaning and moaning by the door and holding her head. Sanders gave a great cry of 'My wife, my wife,' and rushed to her. I stopped him touching her. You see, I was sure at the moment that he had done it, and there might have been something that he wanted to take away or hide.

"'Nothing must be touched,' I said. 'Pull yourself together, Mr. Sanders. Miss Trollope, please go down and fetch the manager.'

"I stayed there, kneeling by the body. I wasn't going to leave Sanders alone with it. And yet I was forced to admit that if the man was acting, he was acting marvelously. He looked dazed and bewildered and scared out of his wits.

"The manger was with us in no time. He made a quick inspection of the room, then turned us all out and locked the door, the key of which he took. Then he went off and telephoned to the police. It seemed a positive age before they came—we learned afterwards that the line was out of order. The manager had to send a messenger to the police station, and the Hydro is right out of the town, up on the edge of the moor; and Mrs. Car-

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penter tried us all very severely. She was so pleased at her prophecy of 'Never two without three' coming true so quickly.

"Sanders, I learned later, wandered out into the grounds, clutching his head and groaning and displaying every sign of grief.

"However, the police came at last. They went upstairs with the manager and Mr. Sanders. Later they sent for me and I went up. The Inspector was there, sitting at a table writing. He was an intelligent-looking man and I liked him.

"'Miss Marple?' he said.

"'Yes.'

"'I understand, madam, that you were present when the body of the deceased was found?'

"I said I was and I described exactly what had occurred. I think it was a relief to the poor man to find someone who could answer his questions coherently, having previously had to deal with Sanders and Emily Trollope, who, I gather, was completely demoralized—she would be, the silly creature! I remember my dear mother teaching me that a gentlewoman should always be able to control herself in public, however much she may give way in private."

"An admirable maxim," said Sir Henry gravely.

"When I had finished, the Inspector said, 'Thank you, madam. Now I'm afraid I must ask you just to look at the body once more. Is that exactly the position in which it was lying when you entered the room? It hasn't been moved in any way?'

"I explained that I had prevented Mr. Sanders from doing so, and the Inspector nodded approval.

"'The gentleman seems terribly upset,' he remarked.

"'He seems so—yes,' I replied.

"I don't think I put any special emphasis on the 'seems,' but the Inspector looked at me rather keenly.

"'So we can take it that the body is exactly as it was when found?' he said.

"'Except for the hat, yes,' I replied.

"The Inspector looked up sharply.

"'What do you mean—the hat?'

"I explained that the hat had been on poor Gladys' head, whereas now it was lying beside her. I thought, of course, that the police had done this. The Inspector, however, denied it emphatically. Nothing had, as yet, been moved or touched.

"He stood looking down at that poor prone figure with a puzzled frown. Gladys was dressed in her outdoor clothes—a big dark-red tweed coat with a gray fur collar. The hat, a cheap affair of red felt, lay just by her head.

"The Inspector stood for some minutes in silence, frowning to himself. Then an idea struck him.

"'Can you, by any chance, remember, madam, whether there

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were earrings in the ears, or whether the deceased habitually wore earrings?'

"Now fortunately I am in the habit of observing closely. I remembered that there had been a glint of pearls just below the hat brim, though I had paid no particular notice to it at the time. I was able to answer his first question in the affirmative.

"'Then that settles it. The lady's jewel case was rifled—not that she had anything much of value, I understand—and the rings were taken from her fingers. The murderer must have forgotten the earrings and come back for them after the murder was discovered. A cool customer! Or perhaps'—He stared round the room and said slowly. 'He may have been concealed here in this room all the time.'

"But I negatived that idea. I myself, I explained, had looked under the bed. And the manager had opened the doors of the wardrobe. There was nowhere else where a man could hide. It is true the hat cupboard was locked in the middle of the wardrobe, but as that was only a shallow affair no one could have been concealed there.

"The Inspector nodded his head slowly while I explained all this.

"'I'll take your word for it, madam,' he said. 'In that case, as I said before, he must have come back. A very cool customer.'

"'But the manager locked the door and took the key!'

"'That's nothing. The balcony and the fire escape—that's the way the thief came. Why, as likely as not, you actually disturbed him at work. He slips out of the window, and when you've all gone, back he comes and goes on with his business.'

"'You are sure,' I said, 'that there *was* a thief?'

"He said dryly, 'Well, it looks it, doesn't it?'

"But something in his tone satisfied me. I felt that he wouldn't take Mr. Sanders in the role of the bereaved widower too seriously.

"'You see, I admit it frankly, I was absolutely under the opinion of what I believe our neighbors, the French, call the *idée fixe*. I knew that man, Sanders, intended his wife to die. What I didn't allow for was that strange and fantastic thing, coincidence.

"My views about Mr. Sanders were—I was sure of it—absolutely right and *true*. The man was a scoundrel. But although his hypocritical assumptions of grief didn't deceive me for a minute, I do remember feeling at the time that his *surprise* and *bewilderment* were marvelously well done. They seemed absolutely *natural*—if you know what I mean.

"I must admit that after my conversation with the Inspector, a curious feeling of doubt crept over me. Because if Sanders had done this dreadful thing, I couldn't imagine any conceivable reason why

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he should creep back by means of the fire escape and take the earrings from his wife's ears. It wouldn't have been a *sensible* thing to do, and Sanders was such a very sensible man—that's just why I always felt he was so dangerous."

Miss Marple looked round at her audience.

"You see, perhaps, what I am coming to? It is, so often, the unexpected that happens in this world. I was so *sure,* and that, I think, was what blinded me. The result came as a shock to me. *For it was proved, beyond any possible doubt, that Mr. Sanders could not possibly have killed his wife."*

A surprised gasp came from Mrs. Bantry. Miss Marple turned to her.

"I know, my dear, that isn't what you expected when I began this story. It wasn't what I expected. But facts are facts, and if one is proved to be wrong, one must just be humble about it and start again. That Mr. Sanders was a murderer at heart I knew—and nothing ever occurred to upset that firm conviction of mine.

"And now, I expect, you would like to hear the actual facts themselves. Mrs. Sanders, as you know, spent the afternoon playing bridge with some friends, the Mortimers. She left them at about a quarter past six. From her friends' house to the Hydro was about a quarter of an hour's walk—less if one hurried. She must have come in, then, about six thirty.

"No one saw her come in, so she must have entered by the side door and hurried straight up to her room. There she changed—the fawn coat and skirt she wore to the bridge party were hanging up in the cupboard—and was evidently preparing to go out again, when the blow fell. Quite possibly, they say, she never even knew who struck her. The sandbag, I understand, is a very efficient weapon. That looks as though the attackers were concealed in the room, possibly in one of the big wardrobe cupboards—the one she didn't open.

"Now as to the movements of Mr. Sanders. He went out, as I have said, at about five thirty—or a little after. He did some shopping at a couple of shops and at about six o'clock he entered the Grand Spa Hotel where he encountered two friends—the same with whom he returned to the Hydro later. They played billiards and, I gather, had a good many whiskies and sodas together. These two men—Hitchock and Spender, their names were—were actually with him the whole time from six o'clock onwards. They walked back to the Hydro with him and he only left them to come across to me and Miss Trollope. That, as I told you, was about a quarter to seven—at which time his wife must have been already dead.

"I must tell you that I myself talked to these two friends of his.

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I did not like them. They were neither pleasant nor gentlemanly men, but I was quite certain of one thing—they were speaking the absolute truth when they said that Sanders had been in their company the whole time.

"There was just one other little point that came up. It seems that while bridge was going on, Mrs. Sanders was called to the telephone. A Mr. Littleworth wanted to speak to her. She seemed both excited and pleased about something—and incidentally made one or two bad mistakes at cards. She left rather earlier than they had expected her to do.

"Mr. Sanders was asked whether he knew the name of Littleworth as being one of his wife's friends, but he declared he had never heard of anyone of that name. And to me that seems borne out by his wife's attitude—she too did not seem to know the name of Littleworth. Nevertheless she came back from the telephone smiling and blushing, so it looks as though whoever it was did not give his real name, and that in itself has a suspicious aspect, does it not?

"Anyway, that is the problem that was left. The burglar story, which seems unlikely—or the alternative theory that Mrs. Sanders was preparing to go out and meet somebody. Did that somebody come to her room by means of the fire escape? Was there a quarrel? Or did he attack treacherously?"

Miss Marple stopped.

"Well?" said Sir Henry. "What is the answer?"

"I wondered if any of you could guess."

"I'm never good at guessing," said Mrs. Bantry. "It seems a pity that Sanders had such a wonderful alibi; but if it satisfied you it must have been all right."

Jane Helier moved her beautiful head and asked a question.

"Why," she said, "was the hat cupboard locked?"

"How very clever of you, my dear," said Miss Marple, beaming. "That's just what I wondered myself, though the explanation was quite simple. In it were a pair of embroidered slippers and some pocket hadkerchiefs that the poor girl was embroidering for her husband for Christmas. That's why she locked the cupboard. The key was found in her handbag."

"Oh!" said Jane. "Then it isn't very interesting after all."

"Oh, but it is," said Miss Marple. "It's just the one really interesting thing—the thing that made all the murderer's plans go wrong."

Everyone stared at the old lady.

"I didn't see it myself for two days," said Miss Marple. "I puzzled and puzzled—and then suddenly there it was, all clear. I went to the Inspector and asked him to try something and he did."

"What did you ask him to try?"

I asked him to fit that hat on the poor girl's head—and of course he

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couldn't. It wouldn't go on. *It wasn't her hat, you see.*"

Mrs. Bantry stared.

"But it was on her head to begin with?"

"Not on *her* head—"

Miss Marple stopped a moment to let her words sink in, and then went on.

"We took it for granted that it was poor Gladys' body there; but we never looked at the face. She was face downwards, remember, and the hat hid everything."

"But she *was* killed?"

"Yes, later. At the moment that we were telephoning to the police, Galdys Sanders was alive and well."

"You mean it was someone pretending to be her? But surely when you touched her—"

"It was a dead body, right enough," said Miss Marple gravely.

"But, dash it all," said Colonel Bantry, "you can't get hold of dead bodies right and left. What did they do with the—the first corpse afterwards?"

"He put it back," said Miss Marple. "It was a wicked idea—but a very clever one. It was our talk in the drawing-room that put it into his head. The body of poor Mary, the housemaid—why not use it? Remember, the Sanders' room was up in the servants' quarters. Mary's room was two doors off. The undertakers wouldn't come till after dark—he counted on that. He carried the body along the balcony—it was dark at five—dressed it in one of his wife's dresses and her big red coat. *And then he found the hat cupboard locked!* There was only one thing to be done—he fetched one of the poor girl's own hats. No one would notice. He put the sandbag down beside her. Then he went off to establish his alibi.

"He telephoned to his wife—calling himself Mr. Littleworth. I don't know what he said to her—she was a credulous girl, as I've already said. But he got her to leave the bridge party early and not to go back to the Hydro, and arranged with her to meet him in the grounds of the Hydro near the fire escape at seven o'clock. He probably told her he had some surprise for her.

"He returns to the Hydro with his friends and arranges that Miss Trollope and I shall discover the crime with him. He even pretends to turn the body over—and I stop him! Then the police are sent for, and he staggers out into the grounds.

"Nobody asked him for an alibi *after* the crime. He meets his wife, takes her up the fire escape, they enter their room. Perhaps he has already told her some story about the body. She stoops over it, he picks up his sandbag and strikes . . . Oh, dear! it makes me sick to think of, even now! Then quickly he strips off her coat and skirt, hangs them up, and dresses her in the clothes from the other body.

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"But the hat won't go on.

"Mary's head is shingled. Gladys Sanders, as I said, had a great bun of hair. He is forced to leave the hat beside the body and hope no one will notice. Then he carries poor Mary's body back to her own room."

"It seems incredible," said Dr. Lloyd. "The risks he took. The police might have arrived too soon."

"You remember the line was out of order," said Miss Marple. "That was a piece of *his* work. He couldn't afford to have the police on the spot too soon. When they did come, they spent some time in the manager's office before going up to the bedroom. That was the weakest point—the chance that someone might notice the difference between a body that had been dead two hours and one that had been dead just over half an hour; but he counted on the fact that the people who first discovered the crime would have no expert knowledge of criminal matters."

Dr. Lloyd nodded.

"The crime would be supposed to have been committed about a quarter to seven or thereabouts, I suppose," he said. "It was actually committe at seven or a few minutes after. When the police surgeon examined the body it would be about half-past seven at earliest. He couldn't possibly tell."

"I am the person who should have known," said Miss Marple. "I felt the poor girl's hand and it was icy cold. Yet a short time later the Inspector spoke as though the murder must have been committed just before we arrived—and I saw nothing!"

"I think you saw a good deal, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry. "The case was before my time. I don't even remember hearing of it. What happened?"

"Sanders was hanged," said Miss Marple crisply. "And a good job too. I have never regretted my part in bringing that man to justice. I've no patience with modern humanitarian scruples about capital punishment."

Her stern face softened.

"But I have often reproached myself bitterly with failing to save the life of that poor girl. But who would have listened to an old woman jumping to conclusions? Well, well—who knows? Perhaps it was better for her do die while life was still happy than it would have been for her to live on, unhappy and disillusioned, in a world that would have seemed suddenly horrible. She loved that scoundrel and trusted him. She never found him out."

"Well, then," said Jane Helier, "she was all right. Quite all right. I wish—" she stopped.

Miss Marple looked at the famous, the beautiful, the successful Jane Helier and nodded her head gently.

"I see, my dear," she said very gently. "I see."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **NORMAN DANIELS**

TITLE: ***The Town That Will Never Forget***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Pierceport, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An unusual story of cumulative power and increasing impact—and with a climax that will stick fast in your memory . . .*

IT WAS THE KIND OF HEARSE NOT even a small and isolated town like Pierceport ever saw any more, and hadn't for many years. Old Man Hart handled most of the local funerals and if his hearse wasn't a shiny Cadillac, it was still reasonably new. This one was at least thirty years old.

It was high, with running boards below the driver's door. The glass panels on the side had black wreaths painted on them. Much of the decoration had peeled or faded, but enough remained so there was no mistaking what had originally been placed there. The headlights were brass and raised above the old fenders on three-inch mountings.

In the front seat were two people —a man at the wheel, a woman at his side. They were both over middle age. That much could be seen. As the vehicle made its way slowly up the street this cloudy morning, people might have been inclined to laugh and ask what Mack Sennett movie the hearse had come out of; but in back was a plain wooden shipping box that filled the whole space and was obviously meant to contain a casket.

People were coming out of the neat white-painted church with its tall steeple. Nearly everybody in Pierceport went to church on Sunday; the few who didn't were mostly young men who would rather lounge in front and ogle the girls as they came out, and try to impress them by smoking cigarettes that dangled from their lips.

The hearse engine gave a rumbling, loose sort of sound, as if it weren't much longer for this world; but it kept going out of sheer respect for its cargo. The ve-

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hicle rolled to a stop directly in front of the church and the driver got out. Now he could be seen as a heavily built man. There was no fat on him, just huge layers of muscle rarely seen in this backwater town.

He opened the door and helped the woman get out. Compared to the man she looked puny, yet she wasn't really a small woman. She just seemed to be, as she stood beside her husband.

The lean, kindly-looking clergyman was watching the newcomers as he shook hands with members of his congregation. Naturally, he felt there was something he could do, so he walked down to the sidwalk and greeted the man and the woman.

"This is quite unusual," he said. "Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

The man spoke. He had a deep bass voice that went with his size, but it was a cultured voice and respectful.

"I am Edward Granger. This is my wife, Yvonne. We ask your permission for a funeral service."

"But I don't quite understand," the minister said. "It isn't that I'd refuse you, but . . . well, it just isn't done this way. No undertaker, no cortege. You are strangers who want to bury someone in this town. Why this town?"

"Because we have purchased a grave in your cemetery," the man explained, as if that settled it completely. "As for the undertaker . . . the body is prepared for burial and we have a permit. Everything is quite in order, I assure you."

"Ah, yes. Well, in that case, naturally I shall do all I can." The clergyman still sounded doubtful.

It was Tom Keeley who pushed his way through the gathering crowd. Tom Keeley was a tall young man with a surly face and moody dark eyes. He moved close to Granger, gently shouldering the clergyman to one side.

"Wait a minute," he said. "What did you say your name is?"

Granger offended Keeley by totally disregarding him. Then Tom Keeley made a mistake. He walked to the back of the hearse, yanked open the rear door, grasped one of the handles on the outer box, and hauled it out so the end of it tipped down and rested on the road. That was as far as he got. A hand with a powerful grip closed around his wrist. He was suddenly twisted about and sent crashing to the ground. He lay there stunned—and then the pain came, and a kind of unholy fear, as he stared at his hand dangling like a useless appendage from his wrist.

"He busted my arm!" Keeley cried out. "He busted it!"

Granger said, "Please, everyone. I am very sorry about this, but what this foolish man did—well, it made me lose my temper."

The woman spoke for the first time. Later, much later, when it

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was all over, someone remembered her voice. They said it sounded like a small silvery bell.

"My husband is an uncommonly strong man and he has a short temper. I too am sorry."

Steve Hollister, built something like Granger but on a slightly smaller scale, was the man who had nerve enough to step out to the tilted box and read the shipping permit tacked to its top. He said nothing, just lifted the end of the box and pushed it back inside savagely—like a man with a sudden hate, but with a certain grudging respect for the dead.

Granger waited for him to come up on the sidewalk and then he said, "So now you know who the dead man is. He was my son. Mike he called himself—Mike Granger. He killed three men in this town seven months ago and last night they killed him in the electric chair. Yes, it is that Mike in the box—with his head shaven. It is your murderer."

"Take him out of here," Steve Hollister said curtly. "We don't want any trouble, but take him out of here. Dead or alive, we don't want that guy in this town."

Yvonne said, "What is it you object to, please?"

"He was a damned killer. Three friends of mine are buried in the cemetery because of him and believe me, there ain't nobody can plant this murderer in the same ground with them."

"Be quiet," the clergyman warned.

"You keep out of it," Steve said sharply. "This don't concern you."

"It does concern me, Stephen. It concerns all of us. A dead man is no longer a murderer or a sinner. An executed man has paid for his crime and is entitled to respect and to the dignity of a Christian burial. And he shall have it."

"Thank you," Yvonne said quietly.

Steve didn't bulge. "This guy leaves town. You heard me. And I ain't saying it again."

It was then that Edward Granger moved up to face Steve. "You are a well built man," he said quietly. "I have no doubt you can fight very well. But I am stronger, and I can fight better, and I shall break your arm too. If you stand in my way, I shall break your arm or worse."

Another voice—this one the shrill voice of Barney Frommer who clerked in the General Store—came from the crowd. "Somebody get the Mayor. Somebody get Mayor Harris. This guy has gotta be arrested and Mayor Harris is the only one who can do it."

Yvonne walked up half a dozen of the steps to the church.

"I would like to say something, if you please. I would like to say that we have a plot in your cemetery—a plot we paid for. We can bury whom we choose there. We are arranging for a rather elaborate

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tomb to be built—or should I say, a monument. I'm not very sure of those things. But it will be the tallest and largest grave marker in the cemetery. We wish to keep alive the memory of our son. And we do not wish this town to forget."

"Is there a law against what we want to do?" Granger asked. "That the graveyard is banned to an executed person?"

"You're damned right there is," Steve Hollister shouted, "and you won't get away with it. I'm warning you, Granger, take your son's body out of here. If you head that hearse to the cemetery, I swear I'll stop you!"

Granger made no reply. He waited until Yvonne joined him and they both climbed into the front of the hearse and drove off A few in the crowd ventured the opinion that the old crate would never even reach the town limits under its own power.

The minister said, "I doubt they are leaving. There is a persistency in that man which will not be denied, and I dread what may happen. It might be that black day all over again, when three young men were killed."

The crowd began to break up. After all, it was Sunday morning and time to go home and put the roast in the oven, or get out the family car. As quickly as the old hearse disappeared down the road, the quiet returned and the street emptied.

But the hearse did not go far. It stopped in front of the only hotel in town and Edward and Yvonne Granger went inside, registered, and paid for the room before the hotel clerk found out who they were and why they were in town.

Yvonne said, "I noticed a florist was open, Edward. I think a wreath—some small token . . ."

"Yes," he said. "We'll arrange for it now."

They had their one suitcase sent up to the room, then went out and passed the hearse without a glance in its direction. Down the street was Lombard's Flower Shop. It wasn't much of a place because there weren't many funerals in this small town and most of the weddings were held in Loganport, ten miles away, because the facilities were better there.

Mr. Lombard came forward eagerly—until he found out they wanted a funeral wreath.

"You two are that crazy kid's folks, ain't you? Yes, you don't have to answer. No other funerals are scheduled, if you can call this one scheduled. Now I ain't selling you no flowers. I don't want your business and all I ask is you leave here peaceably before I have you thrown out."

The laugh was low and deep in Granger's throat as he merely grabbed Lombard by the front of his shirt, lifted him while he kicked and struggled, and set him firmly on top of his counter. Then he

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walked casually out of the shop behind his wife.

In the hotel room—which they hadn't been ordered out of yet, because the news still hadn't reached the clerk—they took stock of things. Granger stood at the window looking down at the small crowd beginning to gather around the hearse. Yvonne wet a towel with cold water and applied it to her forehead.

"Do you really believe what we are doing is right, Edward?"

"Yes," he said. "It's absolutely right. We owe it to Mike."

"Very well. But, Edward, the trouble may be greater than you anticipate."

"I can handle it," he said, and turned to look at her. "Have you ever known any trouble I couldn't handle? Except my son who was blessed with an ambition to roam and look out for himself, and cursed with a temper like mine. I can handle it—don't worry, my dear."

"When shall we get on with it?"

"Let the crowd assemble first. Let them spread the word so everyone will be there."

Yvonne sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. She kicked off her shoes and rubbed her feet. "I wish that we were back in the North Country. I'm afraid I've become almost unwilling to look at good people make fools of themselves." She lifted her legs onto the bed. "At first, when we went to live in the preserve with all the animals you are paid to guard, I thought I could never bear it—but now I miss the peace and quiet, and I wish we were back."

"We'll be back," he said. "Soon now. Rest, Yvonne. The afternoon may be—difficult."

But Yvonne had no time to rest. Mayor Harris used his fist on the door and came in like a bill collector. When he had a good look at Granger, he ceased snorting and wondered why those idiots hadn't told him Granger was such a big man.

"I'm Harris," he said. "Mayor of this town. We have no police department and enforcement of the law is up to me. That's why I'm here."

Yvonne squeezed her feet into the shoes again. "How do you do, Mr. Mayor," she said and offered her hand. Harris took it because Yvonne was the kind of woman no man would dare offend in any way. "I'm delighted you came to see us. There is so much to be straightened out."

"Please sit down," Granger said.

"No, thank you." Harris put up his hackles again. "The fact is, I have something to say and I will not listen to any argument about it. I should put you in jail, Mr. Granger, for assaulting one of our young men."

"I am sorry for that," Granger said.

"Then there's the florist."

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Granger laughed. "His dignity is slightly damaged, that's all, and he shouldn't mind because he hasn't much dignity to lose. You wish us to take our hearse and our dead son and get out of town? Is that what you came to say?"

"Yes," Harris said loudly, just in case some townspeople were listening in the hall.

"If you will show us any state law or town ordinance which directs that an executed man cannot be buried in a graveyard in this town, then we shall leave, just as you suggest."

"Who'd ever think to write such a law?" Harris scoffed.

"Then we shall stay, bury our son, arrange for the monument, and then leave very quietly. That's all there is to it, Mr. Mayor."

"It's not quite as simple as that," the Mayor said nervously. "They won't let you bury him here."

"Who won't?"

"Friends of the three young men your son killed. Friends, relatives—they'll stop you."

"Why? Is there any great and compelling reason why?"

"They don't want that—that murderer buried here! They don't want to be reminded . . ."

"Ah," Yvonne murmured, "now you have come to the core of the problem, Mr. Mayor. They don't wish to be reminded. Yes, I think that's true. And yet, if our son deserved to be electrocuted, and if this town and its people are completely convinced he should have been, they would hardly care if the presence of his grave did remind them. But if, by chance, their consciences are not clear, then a reminder of what they fear to remember would be anathema to them, wouldn't it?"

"No matter what it is," Harris said, not precisely certain of her meaning, "there'll be big trouble if you persist in this terrible foolishness."

"Yes," Granger said, "big trouble. Seven months ago there was big trouble. My son killed three young men. A frightful thing. A thing I could hardly make myself believe. Yet I do not doubt one word of the testimony against him. I do not doubt his guilt and I cannot condone his actions—but that has nothing to do with burying him, and he shall be buried here."

Harris sat down and mopped his face. "Look, Mr. Granger . . . Mrs. Granger, you talk and act like two sensible people. I'll tell you what I'm afraid of. It might wind up with somebody else dead. We've had enough of that in our town. We've had all we want for all time to come. But it will happen—I swear it will—if you don't leave!"

Yvonne shook her head. "We will promise you this. After the burial we'll go away at once, instead of staying the night as we intended."

"But there won't be any burial," Harris persisted. "That's what I'm

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trying to make you understand."

Granger looked down at the street. There was a large crowd around the hearse now, but nobody was opening the rear door. They were milling a bit and he could hear the murmur of their voices. He sat down and began to shine his shoes with one of those treated cloths which hotels provide. He was thinking more of the past than of what he was doing.

"Seven months ago our son told the authorities he had no relatives. But just before the end he had to see us once more, so he had them wire. Therefore, we don't know all the facts.We did not wish to embarrass him by asking too many questions at such a time. Perhaps you would be kind enough to give us your version of what happened that day."

"It was a drunken brawl," Harris said.

"No," Yvonne countered quickly. "Our son did not drink."

"Well, maybe that's true—I guess it is—but the others were drunk. Nobody knows exactly how it started, but it wound up with your boy defying the whole crowd—you know how kids are—and they piled into him and he used a knife. Maybe, if he didn't have a knife . . . if he hadn't bought the blasted thing that very day and said he'd use it if they pestered him any more . . . I don't know—but he did use it. And we don't want him here. Not even dead."

Granger flicked the shoe cloth and examined the high polish. "We shall bury him soon now. Perhaps right away, if you're ready, Yvonne."

"Yes," she said, "I'm ready. I think I would like to leave this town as quickly as possible. I don't like it here."

Harris lost his patience—besides, he thought he'd better do some more shouting. Election came next year and he liked the job even if there wasn't any money in it. So he raised his voice in anger.

"I'm warning you, Granger, if anything happens, I'll hold you responsible. You *and* your wife! Remember that! Take my advice and get out of town with your son's body. Just—just get out—all three of you!"

He stormed out and found the corridor so well populated that he was glad he'd had the last loud word.

Inside the room Yvonne said deeply. "It is going to be bad, Edward—worse than I feared."

"Still we must do what we must do," Granger said. "Are you ready?"

The halls were empty when they left. There was nobody in the lobby and the crowd had left the hearse.

Granger looked through the time-yellowed side windows at the outer box and saw that it had not been disturbed. Then he helped Yvonne into the front and went around to cram his great bulk be-

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hind the wheel. The motor caught and wheezed and groaned, but the vehicle started to move and he headed it toward the long street at the end of which was the town graveyard.

As they passed the church, they saw the minister standing on the steps and then hurry to a car parked at the curb. The clergyman soon caught up and fell into line behind the hearse. It wasn't much of a funeral procession. Yvonne, looking back, smiled gratefully to the clergyman.

Granger grunted and fussed with the brake pedal. He turned a faint smile toward his wife. "This hearse is just about ready to fall apart."

"I hope it will last as far as the cemetery," Yvonne said.

He shook his head. "It is not necessary for it to go all the way. In fact, I'm sure it won't. There—near the gates—do you see them?"

She peered ahead in the grayness of the afternoon and made out the crowd gathered at the cemetery entrance. It seemed that everyone in town must be there, and both sides of the road were now lined with cars.

Suddenly the minister speeded up, cut in front of the hearse, reached the gates ahead of the Grangers, and got out. He waved his arms for attention, but the townspeople ignored him. They were all watching and waiting as the hearse rumbled up.

"The one whose wrist you broke," Yvonne said. "He is among the leaders. And that big man—the one who first ordered us away . . ."

"And the loud-talking one," Granger said. "I heard someone call him Frommer. I think he is the one we have to fear most. However, I am not afraid."

"No," she said, "you never have been, and I've become like you. I'm finally convinced this thing must be done."

He patted her hand and started to slow down. The crowd closed in, blocking the road in a solid mass of humanity. He brought the hearse to a halt and set the handbrake before he climbed down.

Steve Hollister, the biggest man of the group, stepped out. "All right, Granger," he said, "now you know we meant it when we warned you to take that body and get out."

"You warned me," Granger admitted. "But I also warned you that I'll fight any man—one at a time, or all of you together. For my broken head I promise you there will be ten broken arms. So we might as well begin, my friend, because I'm going through if I can keep on my feet."

The minister elbowed a path and took up a position between the two men. "We've had quite enough of this," he said. "It is Sunday, the Lord's day, and no day for quarreling or challenging one another

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to a fight. Mr. Granger, I am on your side, please believe me, but I beg you not to go on with this. Let us try to find another way, or at least give us a little more time to find a sensible solution."

"No," Granger said. "I am not a wealthy man. I cannot afford to waste time. It shall be now."

"Out of the way," Hollister said to the minister. "You heard him. He don't care if it's Sunday or anything else. All he wants to do is make us feel sorry his kid got electrocuted. Well, we don't care if he did. In fact, we're glad he did, because he had it coming, and he ain't going to be buried here."

"Then try and stop me," Granger said, and took two steps forward before Hollister hit him. It was a solid, well delivered blow that rocked Granger almost off his feet —but not quite. Hollister, in getting set to fight, didn't move quite fast enough and Granger's two great arms suddenly wrapped around his middle and squeezed. The pressure was exerted about twenty seconds, and when Granger let go, Hollister simply fell in a heap and didn't move.

"I was gentle with him," Granger said. "I shall not be as gentle with the next man." He looked around. "Who will be next?"

It was inevitable that they'd come at him all together. There was simply no other way to handle a man like Edward Granger, for two or even three men would stand no chance against him. As it was, Granger resisted less than they thought he would, and they soon had him down and seized and held.

Frommer, the smaller man, took command. "Okay, now we do what we gotta do. I guess there ain't gonna be any shirkers. Let's get it over with."

They moved toward the hearse. Granger struggled just once, not using all his strength. "If you harm my wife, what happened here before will be as nothing. Do you hear me?"

The minister reached the hearse first. "I'm sorry," he said to Yvonne. "I can't stop them. Not now. It's gone too far, but I assure you they will not harm you—or your husband, unless he turns on them again."

He extended his hand and helped her down. She smiled wanly.

There were women in the crowd, a lot of them, and some men who were taking no active part. They made way for Yvonne and she went over to where the minister's car was parked and stood there.

The men in the angry group went to work then. First, they yanked open the back door of the hearse, lifted out the wooden box, and set it down on the road. Frommer walked up to Granger.

"We'll give you one last chance. If you give us your word to take

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that out of here and never come back, we'll let you go."

Granger tried weakly to shake himself free. "I intend to do exactly what I said I'd do."

"All right," Fommer said. "You named it, mister. Boys, get on with it."

They tipped the hearse over and began to smash it with axes until it was reduced to a heap of broken glass, wood, and rusted metal that could be dragged off the road and into the vacant lot opposite the cemetery. They piled up most of it, then someone cut the gas tank free and they axed a hole in it and sloshed the gasoline around the remnants of the old hearse; but they saved half of the fuel. Four of them carried the wooden box over and set it on top of the gasoline-soaked debris.

Granger called out, in an oddly calm voice, "Open the box. Open it—and then the casket—and see what you are doing. Are you afraid? Can't you even look at the man you intend to burn? Does death shock you so much you cannot do this? Open it!"

Somebody smashed at the pine box with an ax and they threw the splintered top onto the funeral pyre. Then they lifted the cheap plain casket out and began to swing it so it would land on top of the rubble now ready to be burned. Somebody remembered the extra gasoline and poured it on the coffin.

"I'm sorry," the minister said to Yvonne.

"You did all you could," she said calmly.

The Granger suddenly sprang forward, burst through the crowd, and ran to where the men were holding the casket. They let go and backed up quickly. Granger hunched his shoulders and seemed to pull his head down into them.

"Now," he said, *"now* it is time to fight. Now it is time to break you. Come on. Come on—one or all. Come on!"

Frommer brought up the first gun, an old nickel-plated thing that was still an effective death-dealer. A rifle and a shotgun appeared. The armed men moved forward.

Granger said, "You would kill me to do this thing? Yes . . . yes, you would! But I thought killing was to be barred—barred forever in this town where my son killed three young men."

"Stand aside," Frommer warned, "or, so help me, we'll kill you."

Granger straightened up. "So. So I have goaded you into an admission that you will kill. I have taunted a whole town into a position where murder seems to be *the only way out.*"

Granger sighed. "Listen to me: I am custodian of a forest preserve where animals are allowed to thrive and breed—so I know animals, my friends. I know that any animal can be driven to defend itself. I also know that any man can

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be so goaded that he will lose his sense of reason—like my son was goaded seven months ago. Like my son was taunted and tantalized and tortured until he couldn't take any more—until he turned on you, and men died. *Now you have turned on me in exactly the same manner* —and it is time for me to die."

They stared at him. The voices which flowed in small waves over the crowd were suddenly hushed. Granger eyed them, moving his head back and forth slowly.

"My son stood with his back to the wall and he fought. Now you have your backs to the wall. I've threatened to build a tomb over my son's body—so you will always remember what you would like to forget. It rests heavily on your minds—so heavily that it was easy for me to make you use violence to destroy the corpse you were ashamed of. That is what we had to do—my wife and I—to make you understand."

Yvonne came to his side and took his hand and faced the crowd too. "We sent our son home—to our own town far from here. We did not purchase a burial plot in your cemetery. I do not believe my son would have wished to be buried here. The casket is empty—only weighted to fool you."

"Our son killed," Granger went on, quietly now. "But he was not a wanton murderer, and this you people had to be taught. He did no more than most of you would have done right now. And he was as sorry for his act as most of you would have been."

Frommer opened the casket, closed it again, and walked away. Nobody else doubted Granger's word. They left, singly and in small groups, their lips pressed tight.

The minister held open the door of his car. "I can at least be of some slight service, my friends, in taking you to the bus stop. Thank you for showing all these people how wrong they would have been. They aren't bad people—not really bad."

Granger stood looking at the retreating backs of the townspeople. "No," he said, in an oddly flat voice. "No, they aren't really bad."

"We can go home now," Yvonne said.

He helped her into the minister's car. "Yes. It's all right for us to go home now because the memory of our son isn't as black as it was, and these people here need no tall tomb to remind them of that."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Number Fourteen in our new series of "first stories" . . . The author, not yet 30, has already had an interesting work-background: Pinkerton detective, assistant theater manager, professional vocalist, insurance investigator, encyclopedia salesman, and assistant publicity director for the Indianapolis "500" mile race. He has also edited three Sherlockian anthologies, and at the tender (and daring) age of 19 he wrote a "Critical History and Analysis of the Whodunit."

Now, in his first fiction, Mr. Williamson gives us what is perhaps the most irreverent, blasphemous, and sacrilegious pastiche ever written of Sherlock Holmes. Surely Sir Arthur Conan Doyle never imagined—even in his wildest imaginings—that Holmes and Watson would ever talk like this! Sherlockian devotees the world over will undoubtedly have our heads—but so be it!

Here, then, is A Cool Caper With Sheerbach Tones (wonderful parody name for this particular burlesque!), A Scandal in 221B-Flat, The Case of the Swingin' Sleuth . . .

BOPPING IT IN BOHEMIA; *or,* *Sheerbach Tones in Basin Street*

by JERRY NEAL WILLIAMSON

TO SHEERBACH TONES SHE IS ALways the nuttiest. That cat was always gassing, "That Renee Aadler, man! She is nutty!" Not that he wanted to make time with the chick. He never flipped and all, he just rolled around.

One night I was beating a retreat from a germ-collector when, for kicks, I fell into the old pad at 221B Basin Street.

"The ring-thing suits you, Doc," Tones said. "I'd say you've larded seven and a half pounds."

"Like you are close, man."

"And I see you are jobbing again, Bopson."

"But how do you read that, Tones?"

"Just took it from the top, man."

"Crazy, Tones!"

"No, man, it's a drag. You eye, but you do not dig."

Just then there was the roar of a go-it-all at the curb. "A four-barrel with overhead cam," Tones exclaimed. "There's geet in this case, Bopson."

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"I'd better cut, Tones."

"Hang in, man, this gig could be a gas."

The cat who fell in was like Wilt the Stilt. His threads were unhip but the long green had obviously been unwound. I placed him as a bad face even before he went into his vocal.

"You had my note, Mr. Tones?"

"I think it was B-flat," Tones replied.

"You may address me as the Two-Count von Fram. I'm a Bohemian nobleman, like, and when it comes to V.I.P.s I'm the swinging end."

"Old man, you've used the wrong byline," murmured Tones.

"Pardon me for coming on funky but this plot concerns the famous Pad of Ormstein."

"I already dug, man. I knew right off you were—The Man."

"Tough, Tones!" I exclaimed in admiration.

"A security job. Blow from the chorus, King Man."

"Well, some five years ago I fell in with some heavy cream named Renee Aadler."

Tones checked the Big Book. "Hum! Right between Cannonball Adderly and Lenny Bruce. Pedigreed in Jersey. Belongs to the Christy school. I see you fell hard and the sis scribbled some scandal."

"You speak unforked, sleuth. And now she's set to show Winchell. She's even got an 'in' with Paar."

"Sploud!" moaned Tones sympathetically.

"This scandal jazz will never wash with my new hat. She's strictly from Behind the Cotton Curtain."

"I suppose she digs Dixie?"

"This doll thinks the Dukes are progressive and Welk is solid. Yet somehow she stones me. Tones, I'm so twisted I can't even blow my bongos no more."

"Sounds like you're heading for the marble pad all right. This is a three-pipe problem."

"Three-pipe?"

"A medley, Daddio." Tones took out his tenor to toot. And when Sheerbach Tones blows he is loose. Finally he asked, "Where does this mean jean hang out?"

"On Downbeat Street. But there's more, man. A picture, too."

Tones whistled. "That's *Confidential* stuff, King Man."

"Well, she asked for crumbs at first but before long she wanted the whole loaf of bread. What can I do?"

"You go cop some zz's while I handle the interludes. Fall by tomorrow about this p.m."

With that they spanked the plank and split.

We hoofed it to the canary's pad. There were a lot of rugged busters hanging in. Tones was decked out like a preacher-type.

"How you going to grab this scandal, Tones?" I demanded.

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"The bird herself will sing, Bopson. Hark! Here come her wheels!"

The car stopped. One of the busters opened the door, hoping for a tip, just as another cat moved in. Both those musclers came on like heavyweights and it looked like the canary would get her out-sack ripped. Instead, Sheerbach Tones cut in and got clobbered. When he fell the busters broke and bugged.

"Is he, like, dead?" Renee asked softly.

Her agent nodded. "He's moved out to the Big Bandstand in the Sky."

"No, man," she said, "he's still got his lip. He's breathing."

They picked Tones up and I watched through the window as they put him on a couch. The canary was digging his Brando bit when Tones sat up and lifted his arm like going for a downbeat.

"Fire!" I shouted, and pitched a rocket through the window.

I bugged out before the fuzz fell by and waited at a nearby joint. Tones arrived in half an hour and was high on applause. "Your solo was great lookin'-out, Bopson."

"But I'm still in the crowd, Tones."

"I'll bring you up on the stand. Now, if Renee had been a mother, like, she'd have gone for her sprout when the fire crackled. Right? But being unrung, she went after the picture and the scribbles. I watched, grabbed, and dropped out."

"Nutty, Tones!"

He grinned. "I am a bit of a wig, aren't I?"

"You've got it?" cried the King Man, snatching Tones by the Italian-cut lapels.

"Like don't get physical. Here."

The King Man took the scandal and sighed. "How can I pay you, Tones?"

"Try scale, man, try scale. Maybe I should thank you, anyway. The smoke in that room was like a night club scene." Tones grinned happily.

And that was how Earl Wilson and Dorothy Kilgallen lost headlines, how a swinging scandal almost cooled the Pad of Ormstein, and how the best plans of Mr. Sheerbach Tones were put in another key by a hip chick's wit. You see, the King Man didn't have a credit card and had to pay off Tones with green stamps!

Some day I'll tell you about the trumpet man who fell on his horn. I call it *The Adventure of the Cat with the Twisted Lip.*

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Usurpation of Identity, Number 2—in the manner of Rex Stout, complete with the irascible Nero Wolfe, the long-suffering Archie Goodwin, a fabled orchid, succulent culinary details, a cast of veritable Stoutean characters, and a "locked room" mystery with an extremely clever solution . . . and all (as we have said before of Thomas Narcejac's pastiches) the genuine article, ingeniously conceived and craftily executed.

THE RED ORCHID

by THOMAS NARCEJAC

(translated by Lawrence G. Blochman)

"YOU'RE WRONG," SAID NERO Wolfe. "There are no all-red orchids."

"I'm sorry, but it *is* red."

"Impossible!" Wolfe insisted.

"The orchid in question is a *Coleogyne Pandurata*."

"Your uncle is mistaken."

"But I saw the flower."

"Then you're lying!" Wolfe declared. "Help me, Archie."

He hoisted himself clumsily from his chair and started for the elevator. Isabella Tyndall ran after him.

"Please, Mr. Wolfe."

"I advise you not to insist," I said. "This man is an insensitive, conceited monster. Unless, perhaps, you offered him a really fat retainer."

"Two thousand dollars?" she said tentatively.

Nero Wolfe reached the elevator, turned, and pointed a plump, menacing forefinger at Isabella.

"The *Coleogyne* is a deep pink," he grumbled. "For two years I've been trying to produce a red variety—unsuccessfully. So don't tell me that your uncle—"

"You've never tried supersonic waves," I interrupted. "Personally, I have a feeling that Isabella is telling the truth. Besides, perhaps you didn't notice, but she just offered you three thousand dollars. That's right, isn't it, Miss Tyndall? You did say three thousand?"

"W-why yes," she stammered, but Wolfe was already in the elevator on his way to the roof-top greenhouse.

"Well," I said, "I think we're going to have a hard time convincing him."

Obviously I was already on Isabella's side. She was so young, so delicate, so blonde— Anyhow, nobody except a man like Wolfe, with a tiger's heart and a whale's belly, could help being moved by this

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girl. I took her hand and asked her to sit down.

"Is he angry?" she asked.

"Wolfe? He's already forgotten you. Every morning from nine to eleven he goes up to his orchid hothouse where he can pretend he is God Almighty. Only instead of creating new stars, he tries to invent new flowers."

"He's a poet, then?"

"He's a sadist," I said. "He likes to torture flowers because they are defenseless. Flowers and pretty girls. But as you must have guessed, I am Wolfe's guardian angel. He takes me for a detective: age, 28; weight, 160 pounds; plenty of brawn and a minimum of brain. What he doe not realize is that underneath the deceptive exterior of Archie Goodwin there burns the pure flame of intelligence. Believe me, I suffer. But don't worry. I'll look after your case."

I bent to brush the nape of her neck with a kiss, then sprang to take my place behind the desk.

"Let's see now, Isabella. Tell me your story again. When I look at you, my memory goes blank."

"What about the pure flame of intelligence?"

"It is the pure flame of intelligence, Isabella, that warms my love of beauty and innocence."

Her smile could blow out a fuse.

"Should I begin at the beginning, Mr. Goodwin?"

"Call me Archie. Angels have no surnames."

"Very well. I am the niece of Lawrence Tyndall. My uncle is a scientist who has been experimenting with supersonics for the past ten years. He has always worked in complete secrecy. He cares nothing for fame or glory, and he has never published any of his discoveries. Nobody knows his name. And yet he has perfected a very simple device which can stop an airplane motor at a considerable distance. His experiments were conclusive and he was preparing to reveal his invention to the authorities when the attacks began."

"Fear nothing," I said, still taking notes. "I am here. How many of these attacks have there been?"

"Two. Two weeks ago someone fired a shot at my uncle while he was walking in the garden after dinner. The bullet grazed his head. Then a week ago someone put poison in the camomile tea which he takes every night at bedtime."

"Do you suspect anyone in your household?"

"No one. We live in the country near Lakeville. My uncle has no family except my Cousin John and me. However, circumstancess have forced him to rent out one wing of the Lakeville mansion. He has spent so much money on his experiments that he has taken in a few boarders: the Reverend Norton and Mesdames Saunders and the son of one of them."

"No servants?"

"A couple. Old William and his

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wife. They have been in our employ for thirty years."

"How old is your Cousin John?"

"Twenty-eight. He's been working with uncle ever since he got out of college."

"And the Saunders boy?"

"Billy? He's twenty-three. He's supposed to have cerebral anemia. His doctor prescribed country life."

"Is he in love with you?"

"A little."

"He's the culprit. Everything is quite clear. I—"

"Wait a moment . . . Archie. I haven't finished. During the last ten days things have been disappearing. First, a bottle of good sherry vanished. Then a picnic ham. The day before yesterday a wheel of Vermont cheese was taken."

"You think someone is hiding in the house? Are there any secret corridors, trap doors, or oubliettes?"

"We don't know. My uncle bought the mansion fifteen years ago. It must have been built around 1850. It looks very much like an English castle."

"So the architect certainly provided underground passages and a built-in phantom. We'll check on that. Are the newspapers abreast of affairs?"

"That's just the point. On account of the red orchid. When my uncle discovered he could affect the growth and coloration of flowers by the use of supersonic waves, he sent an article about it to the Lakeville paper."

"How long ago was this?"

"Five or six days. But the reporters took over immediately. They had a field day embroidering on the strange events that have been taking place, and now reporters are swarming over us like locusts. That's why I've come to ask Mr. Wolfe's help. My uncle can't work any more."

"Whose idea was it to consult my boss?"

"John's. But he didn't think I'd have any luck. It seems that Mr. Wolfe hates leaving home."

"Mr. Wolfe is slightly more stationary than the Empire State Building. You might have gone to the police."

"My uncle would rather deal with a private detective."

"Does Old William know how to cook?"

"Yes. Why? He's a pretty good cook."

"That's not good enough. Can he whip up a planked Chateaubriand? Or braised oysters? Or ham with Missouri sauce? Or turtle, Caribbean style? And I won't even mention Zingara sauce or Midnight dressing."

I reached for the book shelves and took down a volume.

"Take this home and study it, Isabella," I said. "When you have mastered the recipes in it, I think we can persuade Wolfe to take your case."

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"About the check . . ." Isabella murmured.

"I think three thousand will be enough—I mean, as a retainer. You'd also better stock up on beer which must be kept ice-cold. And be sure you have several chairs ample enough to contain the royal posterior."

I took a tape measure from my desk drawer and measured Wolfe's chair.

"Fifty inches," I said. "Better make it fifty-two. And you must prepare a ground-floor bedroom. Wolfe never climbs stairs."

Isabella stood up. "Archie," she said. "Archie, you're a—"

"Go on, say it: an angel. People always come around to it in the end."

I kissed her on the lips before showing her to the door.

It took me three days and almost as many nights before I won my argument. Five times Wolfe told me I was fired and had exactly one hour to pack my bags. He gave in at last, but not before I swore that the Tyndall cook was a genius and that the road to Lakeville was as smooth as a skating rink, having been especially constructed for the transportation of fragile goods.

His preparation to brave the wild elements, which consisted of a bright April sun and a gentle breeze scented with sylvan promise, were considerable. He wrapped himself in his camel's-hair coat, wound a heavy scarf around his neck, and protected his head with a sombrero of unheard-of dimensions. He dragged himself to the car into which Fritz Brenner, tears in his eyes, had just loaded the trunks and valises.

"I've put a little emergency snack on the front seat," said Fritz, blowing his nose. "There's a duck pâté, a turkey in aspic, a few Neapolitan sausages, and some sandwiches. The sandwiches are of smoked haddock, caviar, and jam. I've put the wines in the trunk."

"Thank you," sniffed Wolfe. "You might add a few squabs and a slice of salmon. That should hold us for the journey."

He made me roll up all the windows, told me I could not smoke, and with a groan stretched out on the back seat of the limousine.

"Goodbye!" he sighed, while I put the car in gear as gently as I could.

"Three thousand dollars, boss," I said. "That's worth a little trip, isn't it."

"Silence!" Wolfe ordered. "Keep your two eyes on the road and your two hands on the wheel."

The conversation apparently exhausted him, for he pulled the brim of his huge hat down over his eyes so he couldn't see the road. After that I heard nothing except grumbling, groans, protests, and complaints. I tried to explain my theory that young Saunders had stolen the sherry and the cheese to disguise

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his more serious criminal activity, but he wasn't listening. He didn't even reply.

At noon he submitted to the inevitable and nibbled on four sandwiches, a squab, two Neapolitan sausages, a quarter of a turkey, and a few thin slices of duck pâté; but obviously his heart was not in it. After he had finished the Chablis, I had to insist that he drink a bottle of Meursault and a split of Tokay. We arrived in Lakeville toward evening over a road so full of ruts and chuckholes that Wolfe's sighs and supplications were a continuous performance.

"Archie," he whispered as soon as I stopped the car at the steps of a dilapidated perron, "fill up the gas tank so we can leave first thing in the morning."

"But, boss, you'll be dead."

"All right, it may kill me, but at least I'll die at home."

After uttering these manly words, he began the difficult operation of extricating himself from the car. As he opened one door, I opened the door opposite so I could push him vigorously from behind.

Lawrence Tyndall came out to greet us. He welcomed us to Lakeville and asked if we had had a pleasant journey—a risky question to put to Wolfe. Then he led the way to the house.

"Archie," Wolfe complained, "you know how I hate these entrance stairways."

"Only twelve steps, boss," I said. "You can make it with a little effort.'"

Wolfe gave me a look that would have melted a lightning rod. Then, gathering all his strength, he followed Tyndall into a vast drawing room where the inhabitants of the mansion awaited us. Whenever I want to laugh a little—a desire which comes rarely since the Lakeville period—I merely have to remember their faces: Mesdames Saunders, who might have been the reflections in two fun-house mirrors, one of which exaggerated height, the other width, young Saunders who had his aunt's nose and his mother's cheeks—a knife in a pumpkin; the Reverend Norton who was every inch a reverend; and finally Cousin John, so pale and absent-looking that he could easily have been mistaken at night for the phantom of the manor.

Wolfe sat down in the chair that Isabella had pushed toward him and with a gesture cut short all thanks and compliments.

"The *Coleogyne?*" he said.

There was an embarrassed silence. Isabella clasped her hands.

"Let me explain, Mr. Wolfe," she said. "Somebody stole the orchid this morning."

"In that case . . ." Wolfe began, with the first indications of trying to rise from his chair.

But Isabella, the sly one, had the beer ready, and Wolfe seemed somewhat appeased.

"Yes," said Tyndall. "I don't un-

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derstand how it could have happened. The flower was locked up in my laboratory and the thief seems to have passed right through the walls. I'll show you the laboratory after dinner—it's a veritable safe to which only I have the key. And yet—"

"Has there been another attempt on your life?" I asked.

"Not as yet," said the scientist darkly. "Gentlemen, I will show you to your rooms. In half an hour we will meet at the dinner table."

When we were alone, Wolfe tossed his hat on the bed with a dejected gesture. "Archie," he said, "after long and mature reflection I have decided to fire you. I am truly and completely fed up with all your fantasies. You're through. Now."

"Very well," I said. "You'll have to get a chauffeur to drive you back to New York, a man who won't mind stopping every mile to get you cold beer, who will agree to drive through every small town in second gear and over every railroad crossing in first; a chauffeur who can arrange for you to make three thousand dollars in a few minutes. A chauffeur who—"

"Enough!" Wolfe interrupted. "Is this the bed you expect me to sleep in?"

"If we move the sofa over from the right," I said, "and the two chairs from the left, it seems to me—"

"It seems to you, does it? What about the *Coleogyne?*"

"We'll take care of that tomorrow. Meanwhile let us make the mouth-watering acquaintance of the turtle, Caribbean style."

Mouth-watering, my eye! It was evident from the beginning of the meal and Old William might be a top-flight gardener, but that he was as much a stranger to the subtleties of cooking as a professional wrestler to those of diplomacy. He had the gall to serve us a piece of shoe leather that tasted of brine, which Tyndall euphemistically called ham, and a curious collection of charred debris which had once been lamb kidneys. As Wolfe bent over his plate with a puzzled frown, he might have been a Medical Examiner trying to identify the dismembered parts of the victim of a trunk murder.

When Old William announced the steak, Wolfe gave up. Smoothing his discarded napkin, he got up and left the table with a single, explosive word: "Pfui!"

"Pay no attention to him," I said as jauntily as I could. "Wolfe is always a little distrait when he begins to see the solution of a mystery. I would say his present attitude is most encouraging."

Then, anticipating the worst, I added, "When he starts slamming doors, we can be sure that he has found the key to the riddle."

At this moment the dining-room door was closed with such violence that the grandfather's clock stopped. By the slamming of other

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doors we were able to follow Wolfe's progress to his room.

"Well, hurray!" said Tyndall gloomily. "Mr. Wolfe must have found out all there is to know about everything."

The meal ended in an atmosphere of depression. I tried to tell a few funny stories but nobody laughed, and I was relieved when Tyndall invited me to come with him. His beard and his baldness placed him in the category of noble old men, but he was a Dr. Faustus who did not fear death. He told me he was much more afraid of reporters and businessmen, and said he had received so many offers and propositions by mail and telegram during the last few days that he was going mad.

"You'll be rich," I told him.

"Who knows?" he murmured. He opened the door to his laboratory.

I had expected to see a great collection of retorts and alembics, beakers and Bunsen burners, a maze of glass tubing and mysterious machines. Instead, the small room was meagerly furnished and the three or four pieces of apparatus which aroused my curiosity were not working. My host had no desire to make them work.

He did call attention to the security devices which included an absolutely unpickable Yale lock which would defy the most skillful yegg. And since there was no entrance or exit except the one door, the theft of the red orchid was something out of a nightmare. Furthermore, why was the orchid stolen rather than the supersonic devices?

"I'd like to examine your bedroom," I said.

He took me there and I went over the place with a fine comb. The walls all gave back a good, solid sound to my tapping. The single window was completely barred. Nobody could possibly get into the room once Tyndall had locked himself in.

"Since someone tried to poison me," said the scientist, "I have abandoned my old room and sleep here where I am safe from any danger. Moreover, Isabella and John have rooms adjoining mine."

"You don't suspect your tenants?"

"Oh, Mr. Goodwin, they came to me with the highest references."

"Do you think someone is hiding in the house?"

"I think nothing whatever," said Tyndall a little tartly. "It is up to you and Mr. Wolfe to do the thinking."

"One more question, if you please. I understand that you are obliged to rent a part of the mansion. Under these circumstances, how is it possible for you to offer my boss three thousand dollars? Wouldn't—?"

"Mr. Nero Wolfe shall be paid," he cut in. "Good night, Mr. Goodwin. If you need anything, ring for William."

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I left the room, and I heard him locking his door and pushing the bolt. I walked to the drawing room where Isabella was talking to the Reverend Norton.

"Well, well," I said jokingly. "It's not very gay around here this evening."

"The Saunderses are afraid of Mr. Wolfe," Isabella said. "And John is tired."

The Reverend Norton muttered some obscure phrase which seemed to concern the Lord and His punishment of the wicked. Then he arose to take his leave. At this exact moment William appeared, livid and trembling.

"What's up, William?" I said.

"If you'll excuse me, s-sir," William stammered, "someone seems to have stolen the potato masher."

A little after midnight I stepped silently into the hallway, determined to surprise the mysterious burglar. The question had to be settled. Were we the victims of a hoax or was some stranger hiding in the house?

A creaking floorboard not far away warned me that my second theory was probably correct. I thrust my right hand into my pocket and tiptoed toward the pantry, which was lighted by a slanting shaft of moonlight.

The intruder was there—no doubt about it. I could hear him breathing as he groped for something in the cupboard.

Suddenly he brandished a bottle which he placed to his lips with the cool ease of a trumpet player about to go into his solo at a jam session. His eyes raised to heaven, his silent solo was apparently full of difficult trills and grace notes, judging from the movements of his Adam's apple, which bobbed like a diving toy. The moonlight fell full on his face. There was no doubt about his identity.

"Here's how!" I said in a hollow voice.

The Reverend Norton choked and sputtered. He doubled up to catch his breath while I took the bottle from his hands.

"Curious way of praising the Lord," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Praise the L-lord!" he stammered. "Well, I . . . . I've been making the rounds. All these things disappearing . . . Sort of a volunteer watchman, you might say."

"You weren't present when the sherry disappeared, by any chance?"

The Reverend Norton replied with a quotation from Ecclesiastes. I was about to come right back at him with a verse from Kings when a faint sound from the drawing room made us both suddenly cautious.

"Quick!" I whispered, as my eyes looked for a hiding place. I discarded the grocery cabinet as unsuitable. There was no choice. The closet-like refrigerator was the only place large enough.

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I pushed the Reverend Norton inside, got in after him, and pulled the door to without closing it completely. I left a narrow crack, so I had an excellent observation post although a trifle on the frigid side. I began to dream of stalking walruses on an ice floe when an almost imperceptible footstep warned me of approaching danger.

"I think we've got one," I whispered.

"How's that?" said the Reverend Norton, startled.

"Shh!"

There were now two persons standing at the entrance to the pantry. They were talking in low tones about matters which seemed to me on the physical side. Behind me the pastor squirmed and sighed.

"What's the matter?" I whispered.

"I'm freezing," he groaned.

"Patience."

Again I put my eye to the crack and I could not hold back a muffled exclamation. "It's a male," I said.

Worried, the Reverend Norton reached around to feel my pulse. Then, maneuvering in an attempt to see for himself what was going on, he slipped and fell heavily on his ecclesiastical bottom.

The mysterious visitors fled in panic. Sound effects: one treble scream and one bass swear word.

"What were they doing?" asked the pastor fearfully.

"I got the impression they were kissing," I grumbled, furious.

The Reverend Norton spoke of Sodom, Gomorrah, and celestial fire, which did little to heat our immediate surroundings.

So young Billy Saunders was trysting with Isabella? I had recognized him at once, and although I did not get a good look at Isabella, that treble cry was her voice without a doubt.

But were these two the thieves? Sherry is of course a heart-warming complement to the emotions of love, but a cheese seemed to me to be a less appropriate tonic, while a potato masher was, you might say, practically an antidote.

I backed out of the tutelary depths of our Arctic hiding place and the Reverend Norton did likewise. An interview with Isabella was definitely indicated.

"Wait for me in the drawing room," I said to the pastor.

When he had gone, I went after the bottle myself and played a little tune on it. It was bourbon and a hundred proof. It cheered me up. I was ready to take the offensive. At this moment a queer, throaty sound emerged from the drawing room—a sort of a death rattle. Three long strides carried me to the aid of the Reverend Norton.

"Th-there! *There!*" he sputtered.

We were in luck. The phantom of the manor was cavorting right before our eyes. He was a white phantom, rather a dirty-white like all his kind. He floated here and there, or rather he staggered, and

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his contact with the furniture was more violent than one would expect from a creature of such ethereal nature. And the voice that roared from this exuberant ectoplasm was more angry than sepulchral.

"H-he's an attic phantom," stammered the Reverend Norton. "Hallway phantoms are much smaller."

"I would have guessed he was a sewer phantom," I said. "He's certainly foul-mouthed."

While the Reverend Norton was pronouncing the formula for the relief of troubled souls, I switched on the lights. The pastor took a surprised step backward. Standing before us was a man entangled in the dust cover of a piano which some facetious individual had pulled down over his shoulders and fastened with a curtain tie-back. We helped the man free himself.

"Why, it's Billy!" said the pastor.

Young Saunders bore down on me, his fists clenched.

"Are you the joker," he demanded, "who thought up this merry little prank?"

"Why, no," I said. "It was the Reverend Norton. He did the same thing to me a while ago, just for laughs. But can you explain how you happen to be walking around the house at one in the morning, fully dressed?"

"I was thirsty," Billy said. "So I came downstairs, and somebody jumped me in the doorway to the drawing room."

"Naturally you didn't run into anyone else between your room and the drawing room."

Young Saunders blushed a little.

"No."

"And when you get thirsty at night, do you always comb your hair, put on a tie and jacket before coming downstairs?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"None. But it may interest the police."

Billy paled and turned, obviously frightened, to the pastor.

"What's going on? Has anything happened to Mr. Tyndall?"

"That's an idea," I said. "Let's go and see."

We were soon assured that our host was resting peacefully. Through his door we could hear him snoring in perfect chromatic intervals, so perfect that it was too bad we could not register the supersonic notes of the scale.

"So," said Billy, "what is the meaning of your threats?"

"Nothing. Only it seems to me that too many people around here get thirsty at night. Good evening, gentlemen."

I left them to argue with each other. Just as I was closing my door, I heard the Reverend Norton insisting: "I swear to you that it wasn't I."

Then I heard footsteps heading for the pantry.

At nine o'clock I was awakened by someone knocking at my door. I recognized Old William's voice.

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"Come quick—Mr. Tyndall doesn't answer."

I jumped into my bathrobe and opened the door. William was quite upset and had trouble explaining.

"I knocked and knocked, and I called and called," he said, "but he didn't answer. His door is always bolted from inside. I listened but I couldn't hear him moving around or anything."

I went into Wolfe's room.

"Ah, there you are!" Wolfe grumbled. "Is the car ready?"

He was finishing his toilet. His valise, packed and closed, was lying on a chair.

"Look, boss. Tyndall may be dead . . ."

"So much the better," said Wolfe somberly. "May he get ptomaine from his own ham. May he choke on his lamb kidneys. And may the devil take you, too."

"Of course. And speaking of the devil, I saw the phantom last night."

Since Wolfe is completely incapable of tying his own tie, I had a chance to report to him on my nocturnal activities while making him a magnificent butterfly bow.

"All right, Archie, hurry," Wolfe ordered. "We're leaving in an hour. This comedy has gone on long enough."

"What comedy?"

"You mean you still don't understand?"

Whenever the boss casts doubt on my intellectual capacities, I like to leave the room because the argument never favors Wolfe. So I went to join William who was still rattling the scientist's doorknob, with the moral support of the Reverend Norton.

"Let's go," I said, and the three of us hurled ourselves against the door. At the third assault the upper panel split, and it didn't take much more violence to knock out a hole big enough for me to get my arm in, throw back the bolt, and unlock the door.

"Heavens!" exclaimed the Reverend Norton as the splintered door swung open.

"He's dead!" cried William.

Tyndall was lying at the foot of the wall, facing the only window which was still tightly shut and barred. He wore his pajamas.

"Go get Nero Wolfe," I said to William. "Then call your family physician."

Since the Reverend Norton had begun to mumble prayers, I found a job for him, too. I posted him at the door to keep out people who had no business there. Then I started to look for the vial that had contained the poison, for I was sure Tyndall had killed himself. However, I found neither a vial not anything resembling a hypodermic.

I then examined the corpse more carefully, and finally discovered on the back of his right hand a small scratch which seemed swollen along the edges. This was obviously the mark of an injection which

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had killed the scientist, so I was right when I suspected suicide. How else could he have been killed? No one except Tyndall himself could have entered the room or left it. There was no access to the room other than the one door and the one window, and both had been securely locked on the inside —until we broke in.

Hands on hips, I examined the room. The position of the body seemed very strange to me. It was lying on a rug that normally should have been in the center of the room, but which for some reason had been dragged to the foot of the wall. As much as I love gangsters, murderers, and other experts in the art of euthanasia, I hate inventors of puzzles, complicated criminals, and mental-type crooks. Luckily I felt the flooring tremble and I knew that Wolfe was on his way.

Wolfe glanced absently at the dead man, sank to the bed—the springs immediately touched the floor—and tossed me the morning paper.

"Look what they dare print!" he said.

A large headline screamed from the first page:

Nero Wolfe Leaves Home
For First Time in Five Years

The subhead added details:

Ace Detective Called
To Protect Inventor
Of Anti-Aircraft Ray

"I hope you're pleased with your work, Archie," he said.

A sarcastic note in his voice made me prick up my ears.

"I suppose you think I killed him," I said.

He didn't bother to reply. His eyes surveyed the corpse, the walls, the scanty furnishings.

"There's a scratch on the back of his right hand," I said. "I think—"

"Get John," Wolfe interrupted.

I found John in the hallway, huddled with Isabella and the three Saunderses.

"I didn't do it," Billy said. "I can prove it."

I pinched Isabella's arm gently in passing and summoned John to the Master's presence. John was as pale and impassive as ever. He stood at attention in front of Wolfe like a candidate for a college degree who knew he was going to flunk his orals.

"Was the victim doing calesthenics this morning?" Wolfe asked.

"Yes, sir. My uncle always followed the exercises on the eight o'clock broadcast."

"Archie, turn on the radio."

"It's no use," John said. "His radio has been on the blink for three days. We haven't got around to having it repaired yet."

"Then how could your uncle—?"

"I tuned in the broadcast on my own radio, and since my room is right next door he could hear the program perfectly."

"Archie, please. Quickly."

I stepped into John's room, switched on the radio, and got Bing

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Crosby singing "My Heart Is a Tumbleweed." A loud knocking on the wall informed me that the experiment had been conclusive. I reported back to Wolfe.

The positions of the body and the rug were now explained. Tyndall had evidently died during the physical culture lesson. But who had killed him? How had the murderer gained entrance? With all his elaborate hamming, it appeared that Wolfe was no smarter than the rest of us.

"Don't you want to question Billy, boss?" I suggested slyly.

"No."

"Do you know who stole the ham, the cheese, and the rest of the stuff?"

"Yes."

"Then you know why Billy was transformed into a phantom last night?"

"Of course."

"So you'll be able to explain how the murderer managed his entrance and exit right through the solid wall?"

"No doubt."

I was losing my temper. I said, "Then you want me to get the car ready?"

"Please."

I put on my best sneer.

"Try to be polite, Archie," said Wolfe, "if it's at all possible. And find out if the Reverend Norton also went in for calesthenics. Or one of the Saunderses."

I'm afraid I slammed the door. So Wolfe wanted to know if—Well I'd find out for him. The hallway was empty. The inhabitants of the house must be getting dressed in a hurry, I thought, to be ready for the inevitable questioning. I entered Billy's room without knocking.

"Do you go in for physical culture?" I asked.

"Does it show?" Billy blushed. "Come over here. Don't be afraid."

He held out his right arm, bent it slowly at the elbow. "Feel."

Gingerly I touched the flabby protuberance which swelled his sleeve slightly.

"I've become quite an athlete," he said.

He pointed and I followed his gesture to the signs on the walls: "Exercise when you arise; stay well and wise," read one. Another: "Tell me how you breathe and I'll tell you who you are."

"Very good," I said. "What exercises did you do this morning?"

He looked at his radio and scratched his head.

"Let's see. There was one minute of push-ups and two minutes of the Cossack kick—you know, the way the Russians dance. Like this." He crouched on his haunches, folded his arms, and kicked one leg and then the other.

"That's plenty," I said. "The Cossack kick! Idiot!"

I hurried on to the Reverend Norton's room.

"Do you do calesthenics?"

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He didn't seem to understand, so I asked the question again, two tones louder, illustrating by making windmills with my arms.

"Ah, yes," he murmured. "Calesthenics."

He seemed reluctant to admit that he was at all concerned with his muscles, gluteal, pectoral, or umbilical.

"Do you turn on your radio at eight in the morning?"

"Of course, my child. Everyone in the house does."

"First of all, I'm not your child. And second, what exercises did you do this morning?"

The Reverend Norton blushed, then whispered, "I did the Cossack kick for two minutes. Then—"

"That's enough," I said, and hurried on to interview the larger of the two Mrs. Saunderses.

She barely had time to retreat squealing behind a screen.

"I suppose you, too, did the Cossack kick this morning?" I said.

Another squeal, which I interpreted as affirmative.

At the foot of the stairs I ran into a tall man in a gray flannel suit.

"I'm from the Armstrong Corporation," he said. "I should like to see Mr. Tyndall's nephew."

Nero Wolfe loomed in the hall way. "What do you want with the young man?" he demanded.

"I should like to negotiate an option on the patents."

"Do you think Mr. Tyndall's invention is worth anything?" Wolfe asked.

The tall man smiled and winked. "If it was worthless, you wouldn't be here, Mr. Wolfe."

"Did you hear that, Archie?" Wolfe shouted. This was not going to be one of his good days.

He went back into the scientist's room, and before joining him I showed the man from Armstrong Corporation where he could find John.

"They all do calesthenics," I told Wolfe. I was in bad humor and didn't hide it.

"What kind of calesthenics?"

"Exercises . . . to strengthen the muscles and limber the joints. You wouldn't understand."

Wolfe frowned. "Careful, Archie. What exercises were they doing this morning?"

"The Cossack kick."

"Demonstrate, Archie."

"Listen, boss. I'm very patient, but—"

"Take it or leave it, Mr. Goodwin."

"Oh, very well." I squatted on my haunches, folded my arms, and kicked—maybe more like a Cossack's mule than a Cossack. "Should I whistle some Khatchaturian?"

Wolfe watched me through his heavy, half-closed eyelids.

"That's enough," he said.

"Please note," I began, "that I am not paid to—"

"I was right!" he cut in. "The

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red *Coleogyne* has never existed. Archie, get everybody in here right away. Then search their rooms, every room, until you find a phonograph recording. You will bring the disc to me."

The quarters of Mesdames Saunders yielded nothing but beauty preparations. In the room of the Reverend Norton there were chiefly bottles—many bottles, all shapes, all sizes, all brands, all empty. Billy Saunders' room contained little of interest: suits, ties, books with telltale titles like "How to Become a Champion" and "Physical Culture for All." I was lighting a cigarette when I noticed the odor. It was a stale smell, and it seemed to be strongest in the vicinity of a hatbox perched on a shelf in the closet.

Climbing on the chair, I took down the box and lifted the lid. Then I rushed for the window which I threw open wide. I had just hit the jackpot—or some kind of pot. At the bottom of the hatbox there were a bottle of sherry, the picnic ham, the potato masher, and something that was without doubt a Vermont cheese in search of *lebensraum*. I had the goods on young Billy. I had suspected him from the start. And this big hippopotamus of a Wolfe wanted me to look for a recording!

Well, I found the disc. In fact, I found four—all in Isabella's room. They were stacked in the top of a portable phonograph and according to the labels they were all dance music. No doubt about it, the boss was getting old. He ought to turn in his buzzer.

I put the portable and the hatbox in the hall and entered Tyndall's room. Wolfe was still sitting on the bed, questioning Isabella. Billy, very pale, was doing his best not to look at the corpse. Mesdames Saunders and the Reverend Norton seemed on the point of giving up the ghost. As for John, he was biting his nails. A nice little family group.

"When your uncle was fired on," said Wolfe, "were you present?"

"No," said Isabella.

"Did you see the poisoned camomile tea?"

"No. But my uncle was not a liar, and if he kept locking himself in this room, it was certainly because he was afraid of something."

"Do you have a key to the laboratory?"

"No. There is only one key and my uncle always carried it with him."

Wolfe turned to me. "Did you find it, Archie?"

"I always find it, boss. All the stolen articles with the exception of the orchid were in a hatbox in young Saunders' room."

"That's a lie!" cried Billy. "I protest. This is a frame-up."

He continued to protest but his words were lost in the uproar. Everybody was talking at once, and one of the Mesdames Saunders—

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the skinny one—seemed about to faint.

"Silence!" Wolfe ordered. "The recording, Archie?"

"There are four of them in a portable."

"Four? Take them next door to John's room and play them."

"I didn't see any phonograph in John's room."

"There must be one. The radio has a turntable and pickup attached."

The old devil was right. But the experiment didn't promise much. The first disc was a blues number with Ted Lewis. The second was a samba. The third was Benny Goodman and his licorice stick. It would have been simpler to throw Billy in the jug without further ado. I pushed the needle to the grooves of the fourth disc.

"Good morning, dear listeners," said a voice. "Our two hundred and forty-fifth physical culture session is about to begin. Breathe deeply. Go on, fill your lungs. Good . . . Now stand with your back against the wall. Rise on your toes. Fine. Now raise your arms above your head. Stretch. Backward . . . A little more, until the backs of your hands touch the wall . . . Very good. Now bend forward from the waist. A little more. A little more. Are the tips of your fingers touching the floor? Excellent. Now straighten up, arms above your head, until the backs of your hands are again touching the wall. Got it? Good. Now we'll repeat the movement in ever-increasing rhythm. Ready? One, two, three—up! One, two, three—up!"

There was knocking on the wall. I turned off the machine and went back to Wolfe. He smiled at me, but his audience seemed petrified.

"What the devil is this all about?" I wanted to know.

"Mr. Tyndall," said Wolfe, "was standing with his back against the wall, in accordance with instructions coming from the next room—by radio, he thought. You stand there, Archie, but be careful—do not raise your arms for any reason! Now turn your head and look upward. Can you see a small nail sticking out above your head? It's difficult to see—lost in the wallpaper design."

I finally saw it. It was either a very fine brad or a thin nail with the head filed off. I reached up.

"Don't touch it!" Wolfe yelled.

I began to get the idea.

"It's smeared with poison?" I asked.

"Yes. When Tyndall raised his arms, the back of one hand was scratched by the poisoned nail and death occurred within a few minutes. Archie, please stand at the door with your revolver drawn. The murderer is here among us."

I took up my post. They all stood with their backs to me, listening to Wolfe who was facing them.

"My compliments, John," said Wolfe. "A very ingenious trap."

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John squirmed on his chair and Wolfe added, "Sit still, John. Don't make Archie nervous."

"Aren't you going to explain?" said the Reverend Norton.

"It's very simple," said Wolfe. "Tyndall was a victim of his own publicity. He needed money. Nobody seemed interested in his experiments or discoveries. So when his invention was ready for unveiling, he decided to draw attention to himself by a series of simulated attempts on his life. John and Isabella, naturally, were in the know."

"Isabella?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, indeed."

"What about Billy?"

"Stop interrupting me, Mr. Goodwin," said Wolfe tartly. "The tenants were not involved. Tyndall chose them for the precise reason that they were—well, harmless; credulous, if you'd rather. Their declarations to the press could only confirm his own story. You know the results. The newspapers had a field day. A magnificent page one mystery. An unknown criminal hiding in the mansion, stealing food and drink at night. An eminent scientist in danger, his invention on the point of falling into enemy hands. It became imperative, therefore, to buy his invention immediately—at a considerable figure, of course. Offers were doubtless made which he refused. Competitive bidding drove up the price. And John, to stimulate public curiosity even more, conceived the idea of bringing me to Lakeville."

"The orchid!" I was beginning to see light.

"Exactly. It was a clumsy trick, for it made me immediately suspicious. An all-red orchid! No such thing. As soon as we got here I realized we were being hoaxed. I wouldn't have minded if the cooking had been distinguished. But John, who felt he was going to be short-changed by his uncle in the sharing of the spoils, decided to play another game—with Isabella's help. He made a record of the physical culture lesson you just heard, planted the poisoned nail in the wall, and the trap was set. Isabella made a date to meet Billy last night, since Billy had been wooing her for some time—"

"Isabella?" I protested again. "You don't really think so."

Wolfe didn't even bother to shrug.

"Billy," he continued, "met Isabella in the pantry while John hid the stolen articles in Billy's room. If there was to be a police investigation, suspicion would therefore fall on Billy. This morning Isabella took the recording from John's room to her own, but did not have time to destroy it."

"But why did John tie up Billy in that slip cover?"

Wolfe's lips twisted into a sort of cannibal grin.

"Because John is in love with Isabella and he felt no reluctance about manhandling his rival."

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"And you want me to believe that you discovered the truth by sheer reasoning while lying in bed?"

"Ah, yes, the bed. Let's talk about the bed," Wolfe rumbled. "The bed was so hard and so narrow that I didn't close my eyes all night. I had plenty of time for mature reflection, Mr. Goodwin."

He was working himself into fresh anger. It was time I took him down a peg.

"What was the vital clue that put you on the right track, boss?"

"The Cossack kick," said Wolfe. "Since Tyndall could not have been killed in the manner he was during the course of such an exercise, it was obvious that he was not following this morning's radio calesthenics. Therefore it must have been a recording, not an actual broadcast, which came to him through the wall from John's room. It was of course John who put his uncle's radio out of order."

There was a knock at the door. I stepped aside to let William in.

"The police have arrived," h said.

"Send them in," Wolfe saic "And bring me some beer."

I looked at Isabella. Once agai I was an unemployed Don Juan.

The Armstrong Corporatio claimed rights to Lawrence Tyn dall's invention, but refused to pa royalties to John pending outcom of the murder trial.

Wolfe coldly held me responsibl for the three thousand dollar fe which I had negotiated as his re tainer for solving the Lakevill mystery, and said he would collec by withholding one dollar a weel from my salary. By the time th debt is paid I will be eighty-seve years old.

Without telling Wolfe, I change the text of our classified ad whicl runs in the Sunday papers. It nov reads:

NERO WOLFE PVT DET AGENCY—Conf invstns. Shad wng. Missng pers loctd. Consults by appmt. Men only. No bachs need apply.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **FREDRIC BROWN**

TITLE: ***Mr. Smith Protects a Client***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Henry Smith, insurance agent

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An "impossible" murder: Carlos Perry was stabbed when there was no one in the house and under conditions that proved no one could have possibly entered . . . but fair warning: don't be lulled by the obvious.*

THE ANCIENT BUT IMMACULATE automobile turned in at the driveway of the big country house. It came to a stop exactly opposite the flagged walk that led to the porch of the house.

Mr. Henry Smith stepped from the car. He took a few steps toward the house and then paused at the sight of a wreath on the front door. He murmured something to himself that sounded suspiciously like, "Dear me," and paused for a moment. He took off his gold-rimmed pince-nez glasses and polished them carefully.

He replaced the glasses and looked at the house again. This time his gaze went higher. The house had a flat roof surmounted by a three-foot parapet. Standing on the roof behind the parapet, looking down at Mr. Smith, was a big man in a blue serge suit. A gust of wind blew back the big man's coat and Mr. Smith saw that he wore a revolver in a shoulder holster.

The big man pulled his coat together, butttoned it, and stepped back out of sight. This time, quite unmistakably, Mr. Smith said, "Dear me!"

He squared his gray derby hat, went up onto the porch, and rang

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the doorbell. After about a minute, the door opened. The big man who had been on the roof opened it, and frowned down at Mr. Smith.

"Yeah?" said the big man.

"My name is Henry Smith," answered Mr. Smith. "I would like to see Mr. Walter Perry. Is he home?"

"No."

"Is he expected back soon?" asked Mr. Smith. "I . . . ah . . . have an appointment with him. That is, not exactly an appointment. I mean, not for a specific hour. But I talked to him on the telephone yesterday and he suggested that I call sometime this afternoon." Mr. Smith's eyes flicked to the funeral wreath on the open door. "He isn't . . . ah—"

"No," said the big man. "His uncle's dead, not him."

"Ah, murdered?"

The big man's eyes opened a little more. "How did you know that? The papers haven't—"

"It was just a guess," Mr. Smith said. "Your coat blew back when you were on the roof and I saw you were wearing a gun. From that and your . . . ah . . . general appearance, I surmise that you are an officer of the law. If my guess of murder is correct, I hope that you are, and not . . . ah—"

The big man chuckled. "I'm Sheriff Osborne, not the murderer." He pushed his hat back farther on his head. "And what was your business with Walter Perry, Mr. . . . uh—"

"Smith," said Mr. Smith. "Henry Smith, of the Phalanx Insurance Co. My business with Walter Perry concerned life insurance. My company, however, also handles fire, theft, and casualty insurance. We're one of the oldest and strongest companies in the country."

"Yeah, I've heard of the Phalanx. Just what did Walter Perry want to see you about? Wait, come on in. No use talking in the doorway. There's nobody inside."

He led the way across the hall, into a large, luxuriously furnished room in one corner of which stood a mahogany Steinway grand. He waved Mr. Smith to an overstuffed sofa and perched himself on the bench of the piano.

Mr. Smith sat down on the plush sofa and placed his gray derby carefully beside him. "The crime," he said, "I take it, would have occurred last night. You suspect Walter Perry and are holding him?"

The sheriff's head tilted slightly. "And from what," he wanted to know, "do you take all that?"

"Obviously," said Mr. Smith, "it had not yet occurred when I talked to Walter Perry late yesterday, or he would certainly have mentioned it. Then, if the crime had occurred today, I would expect more activity about—coroner, undertaker, deputies, photographers. The discovery must have occurred no later than early this morning for all that to be over with, and the . . . ah . . . remains taken away. I take it

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that they are, because of the wreath. That would indicate that a mortician has been here. Did you say we had the house to ourselves? Wouldn't an establishment of this size require servants?"

"Yeah," answered the sheriff. "There's a gardener somewhere around and a groom who takes care of the horses—Carlos Perry's hobby was raising and breeding horses. But they aren't in the house—the gardener and the groom, I mean. There were two inside servants, a housekeeper and a cook. The housekeeper quit two days ago and they hadn't hired a new one yet, and the cook— Say, who's questioning who? How did you guess we were holding Walter on suspicion?"

"A not illogical inference, Sheriff," said Mr. Smith. "His absence, your manner, and your interest in what he wanted to see me about. How and when was Mr. Carlos Perry killed?"

"A little after two o'clock, or a little before, the coroner says. With a knife, while he was in bed asleep. And nobody in the house."

"Except Mr. Walter Perry?"

The sheriff frowned. "Not even him, unless I can figure out how— Say, who's questioning who, Mr. Smith? Just what was your business with Walter Perry?"

"I sold him a policy—not a large one; it was for only three thousand dollars—a few years ago while he was attending college in the city. Yesterday I received a notice from the main office that his current premium had not been paid and that the grace period had expired. That would mean loss of the policy, except for a cash surrender value—very small, considering that the policy was less than three years old. However, the policy can be reinstated within twenty-four hours after expiration of the grace period, if I can collect his premium and have him sign a statement that he is in good health and has had no serious illness since the policy date. Also, I hoped to get him to increase the amount . . . ah— Sheriff, how can you possibly be certain that there was no one else in the house at the time Mr. Perry was killed?"

"Because," said the big man, "there were two men *on* the house."

"You mean, on the roof?"

The sheriff nodded glumly. "Yeah," he answered. "Two private detectives from the city, and they not only alibi each other—they alibi everybody else." He grunted. "Well, I hoped your reason for seeing Walter would tie in somewhere, but I guess it doesn't. If anything comes up, I can reach you through your company, can't I?"

"Of course," said Mr. Smith. But he made no move to go.

The sheriff had turned around to the keyboard of the Steinway grand. With a morose finger he picked out the notes of *Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater.*

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Mr. Smith waited patiently until the sheriff was finished. Then he asked, "Why were two detectives on the roof, Sheriff? Had there been a warning message or threat of some sort?"

Sheriff Osborne turned around on the piano bench and regarded the little insurance agent glumly.

Mr. Smith smiled deprecatingly. He said, "I hope you don't think I'm interfering, but can't you see that it's part of my job, part of my duty to my company, to solve this crime, if I can?"

"Huh? You didn't have insurance on the old guy, did you?"

"No, just on young Walter. But the question arises—is Walter Perry guilty of murder? If he is, I would be doing my employer a disservice to go out of my way to renew his policy. If he is innocent, and I do not remind him that his policy is about to lapse, I am doing a disservice to a client. So I hope you see that my curiosity is not merely . . . ah . . . curiosity."

The sheriff grunted.

"There was a threat, a warning?" Mr. Smith asked.

The sheriff sighed deeply. "Yeah," he said. "Came in the mail three days ago. Letter saying he'd be murdered unless he made restitution to all the people he'd gyped out of money on songs he'd stolen —pirated, I think they call it in that game—from them. He was a song publisher, you know."

"I recall his nephew having mentioned it. Whistler and Company, isn't it? Who is Mr. Whistler?"

"There ain't any," replied the sheriff. "It's a long— All right, I might as well tell you. Carlos Perry used to be in vaudeville—a solo act, whistling. 'Way back when—when there was vaudeville." The sheriff sighed. 'When he took on a girl assistant, an accompanist, he billed himself as Whistler and Company, instead of using his name. See?"

"And then he got into song publishing, and used the same name for a company name. I see. And did he really cheat his clients?"

The sheriff said, "I guess he did. He wrote a couple of songs himself that went fairly well, and used the money he got from 'em to set himself up in publishing. And I guess his methods were crooked, all right. He was sued about a dozen times, but usually came out on top and kept right on making hay. He had plenty. I wouldn't say he was a millionaire, but he must have been half of one, anyway.

"So three days ago this threatening letter comes in the mail, and he showed it to us and wanted protection. Well, I told him we'd work on finding out who sent the letter, but that the county couldn't afford to assign anybody to permanent protection duty and if he wanted that, he'd have to hire it done. So he went to the city and hired two men from an agency."

"A reputable one?"

"Yeah, the International. They

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sent Krauss and Roberts, two of their best men."

The sheriff's hand, resting on the keyboard, struck what he probably intended as a chord.

"Last night," the sheriff went on, "as it happened, nobody was in or around the place here except the boss—I mean, Carlos Perry—and the two International ops. Walter was staying overnight in the city—went in to see a show and stayed at a hotel, he says. We've checked. He went to the hotel all right, but we can't prove he stayed in his room, or that he didn't. Checked in at about midnight, and left a call for eight. He could've made it here and back, easy.

"And the servants—well, I'd told you the housekeeper had quit and not been replaced yet. Just coincidence the other three all happened to be away. The cook's mother's critically sick; she's still away. It was the gardener's night off; he spent it with his sister and her husband in Dartown, like he always does. The other guy, the horse trainer or groom or whatever you'd call him went to town to see a doctor about an infected foot he'd got from stepping on a nail. Drove in in Perry's truck and the truck broke down. He phoned and Perry told him to have it fixed at an all-night garage, sleep in town, and bring it back in the morning. So, outside of horses and a couple cats, the only people around last night were Perry and the two private ops.

Mr. Smith nodded gravely. "And the coroner says the murder happened about two o'clock?"

"He says that's fairly close, and he's got something to go by, too. Perry turned in about midnight, and just before he went to his room he ate a snack out of the icebox. One of the ops, Roberts, was with him in the kitchen and can verify what he ate and when. So—you know how a coroner can figure time of death, I guess—how far digestion has proceeded. And—"

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Smith.

"Let's go up on the roof," suggested the sheriff. "I'll show you the rest of it, easier'n I can tell you."

He got up from the piano bench and went toward the stairs, Mr. Smith following him like a small tail on a large comet. The sheriff talked back over his shoulder.

"So at midnight Perry turns in. The two ops search the place thoroughly, inside and out. There ain't nobody around then. They'll swear to that, and like I said, they're good men."

"And," said Mr. Smith cheerfully, "if someone was already hiding on the premises at midnight, it couldn't have been Walter Perry. You verified that he checked in at a hotel at midnight."

"Yeah," the sheriff rumbled. "Only there wasn't nobody around. Roberts and Krauss say they'll turn in their licenses if there was. So they went up, this way, to the roof,

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because it was a moonlight night and that's the best place to watch from. Up here."

They had climbed the ladder from the back second-floor hallway through the open skylight and now stood on the flat roof. Mr. Smith walked over to the parapet.

Sheriff Osborne waved a huge hand. "Look," he said, "you can see all directions for almost a quarter of a mile—farther than that most ways. There was moonlight—not bright enough to read by, maybe, because the moon was low in the sky—but both the International men were on this roof from around midnight to half-past two. And they swear nobody crossed any of those fields or came along the road."

"They were both watching all that time?"

"Yeah," the sheriff answered. "They were gonna take turns, and it was Krauss' time off first, but it was so nice up there on the roof and he wasn't sleepy, so he stuck around talking to Roberts instead of turning in. And while they weren't watching all directions every second—well, it'd take anybody time to cross the area where they could've seen him. They say it couldn't have been done."

"And at two thirty?"

The sheriff frowned. "At two thirty Krauss decided to go downstairs and take a nap. He was just going through the skylight there when the bell started to ring—the telephone bell, I mean. The phone's downstairs, but there's an extension upstairs and it rings in both places.

"Krauss didn't know whether to answer it or not. He knew out in the country here, there are different rings for different phones and he didn't know whether it was Perry's ring or not. He went back up on the roof to ask Roberts if he knew, and Roberts did know, and it was Perry's ring on the phone, so Krauss went down and answered it.

"It wasn't anything important; it was just a misunderstanding. Merkle, the horse guy, had told the all-night garage he'd phone to find out if the truck was ready; he meant when he woke up in the morning. But the garageman misunderstood and thought he was to call when he'd finished working on the truck. And he didn't know Merkle was staying in the village. He phoned out to the house to tell 'em the truck was ready. He's a kind of dumb guy, the one that works nights in the garage, I mean."

Sheriff Osborne tilted his hat back still farther and then grabbed at it as a vagrant breeze almost removed it entirely. He said, "Then Krauss got to wondering how come the phone hadn't waked Perry because it was right outside his bedroom door and he knew Perry was a light sleeper; Perry'd told him so. So he investigated and found Perry was dead."

Mr. Smith nodded. "Then, I suppose, they searched the place again?"

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"Nope. They were smarter'n that. Good men, I told you. Krauss went back up and told Roberts, and Roberts stayed on the roof, watching, figuring maybe the killer was still around and he could see him leaving, see? Krauss went downstairs, phoned me, and while I was getting around here with a couple of the boys, he searched the place again, Roberts watching all the time from the roof. Krauss searched the house and the barns and everywhere, and then when we got here, we helped him and went all over it again. There wasn't nobody here. See?"

Mr. Smith nodded again. He took off his gold-rimmed glasses and polished them, then walked around the low parapet, studying the landscape.

The sheriff followed him. He said, "Look, the moon was low in the northwest. That meant this house threw a shadow across to the barns. A guy could get that far, easy, but to and from the barns he'd have to cross that big field as far as the clump of trees 'way down there at the edge of the road. He'd stick out like a sore thumb crossing that field. And outside of the barns that there chunk of woods is the nearest possible cover he could've come from. It'd take him ten minutes to cross the field, and he couldn't have done it."

"I doubt," observed Mr. Smith, "that any man would have been so foolish as to try it. The moonlight works both ways. I mean, he could have seen the men on the roof, easily, unless they were hiding down behind the parapet. Were they?"

"Nope. They weren't trying to trap anybody. They were just watching, most of the time sitting on the parapet, one facing each way, while they talked. Like you say, he could've seen them just as easy as they could've seen him."

"Um-m-m," said Mr. Smith. "But you haven't told me why you're holding Walter Perry. I presume he inherits—that would give him a motive. But according to what you tell me about the ethics of Whistler and Company, a lot of other people could have motives."

The sheriff nodded glumly. "Several dozen of 'em. Especially if we could believe that threatening letter."

"And can't you?"

"No, we can't. Walter Perry wrote it and mailed it to his uncle. We traced the typewriter he used, and the stationery. And he admits writing it."

"Dear me," declared Mr. Smith earnestly. "Does he say why?"

"He does, but it's screwy. Look, you want to see him anyway, so why don't you get his story from him?"

"An excellent idea, Sheriff. And thank you very much."

"It's all right. I thought maybe thinking out loud would give me some idea how it was done, but it ain't. Oh, well. Look, tell Mike at

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the jail I said you could talk to Perry. If Mike don't take your word for it, have him phone me here. I'll be around."

At the open skylight Mr. Henry Smith paused to take a last look at the surrounding country. He saw a tall, thin man wearing denim coveralls ride out into the field from the far side of the barn.

"Is that Merkle, the trainer?" he asked.

"Yep," said the sheriff. "He exercises those horses like they was his own kids. A good guy, if you don't criticize his horses—don't try that."

"I won't," said Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith took another look around, then went down the ladder and the stairs and got back into his car. He drove slowly and thoughtfully to the county seat.

Mike, at the jail, took Mr. Smith's word that Sheriff Osborne had given permission for him to talk to Walter Perry.

Walter Perry was a slight young man who wore horn-rimmed glasses with thick lenses. He smiled ruefully at Mr. Smith. He said, "It was about renewing my policy that you wanted to see me, wasn't it? But you won't want to now, of course, and I don't blame you."

Mr. Smith studied him a moment. He asked, "You didn't . . . ah . . . kill your uncle, did you?"

"Of course not."

"Then," Mr. Smith told him, "just sign here." He produced a form from his pocket and unscrewed the top of his fountain pen. The young men signed, and Mr. Smith folded the paper and put it back in his pocket.

"But I wonder, Mr. Perry," said Mr. Smith, "if you would mind telling me just why you . . . ah—Sheiff Osborne tells me that you admit sending a letter threatening your uncle's life. Is that right?"

Walter Perry sighed. "Yes, I did."

"But wasn't that a very foolish thing to do? I take it you never intended to carry out the threat."

"No, I didn't. Of course, it was foolish. It was crazy. I should have seen that it would never work. Not with my uncle." He sighed again and sat down on the edge of the cot in his cell. "My uncle was a crook, but I guess he wasn't a coward. I don't know whether that's to his credit or not. Now that he's dead, I hate to—"

Mr. Smith nodded sympathetically. "Your uncle had, I understand, cheated a great many song writers out of royalties from their creations. You thought you might frighten him into making restitution to the ones he had cheated?"

Walter Perry nodded. "It was silly. One of those crazy ideas one gets. It was because he got well."

"Got well? I'm afraid I don't—"

"I'd better tell you from the beginning, Mr. Smith. It was two years ago, about the time I was graduated from college—I worked my way through; my uncle didn't

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foot the bill—that I first learned what kind of an outfit Whistler and Company was. I happened to meet some former friends of my uncle—old-time vaudeville people who had been on the circuits with him. They were plenty bitter. So I started investigating, and found out about all the lawsuits he'd had to fight and—well, I was convinced.

"I was his only living relative, and I knew I was his heir, but if his money was crooked money—well, I didn't want it. He and I had a quarrel and he disinherited me, and that was that. Until a year ago when I learned—"

He stopped, staring at the barred door of the cell. "You learned what?" Mr. Smith prompted.

"I learned, accidentally, that my uncle had some kind of cardiac trouble and didn't have long to live, according to the doctor. Probably less than a year. And—well, it's probably hard for anybody to believe that my motives were good, but I decided that under those circumstances, I was missing a chance to help the people my uncle had cheated, that if I was still his heir, I could make restitution after his death of the money he had stolen from them. You see?"

Walter Perry looked up at the little insurance agent from his seat on the cot, and Mr. Smith studied the young man's face, then nodded.

"So you effected a reconciliation?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Smith. It was hypocritical, in one way, but I thought it would enable me to square off those crimes. I didn't want his money, any of it. But I was sorry for all those poor people he'd cheated and—well, I made myself be hypocritical for their sake."

"You know any of them personally?"

"Not all, but I knew I could find most of the ones I didn't know through the records of the old lawsuits. The ones I met first were an old vaudeville team by the name of Wade and Wheeler. I met a few others through them, and looked up some of the others. Most of them hated him like poison, and I can't say I blame them."

Mr. Smith nodded sympathetically. "But the threatening letter. Where does that fit in?"

"About a week ago I learned that his heart trouble was much better. They'd discovered a new treatment with one of the new drugs, and while he'd never be in perfect health there was every chance he had another twenty years to live—he was only forty-eight. And, well, that changed things."

The young man laughed ruefully He went on, "I didn't know if I could stand up under the strain of my hypocrisy that long, and anyway, it didn't look as though restitution would come in time to do any good to a lot of the people he owed money to. Wade and Wheeler, for insfance, were older than my uncle—he could easily outlive

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them, and most of the others. You see?"

"So you decided to write a letter threatening his life, pretending that it came from one of the people he'd cheated, thinking it might scare him into giving them their money now?"

"Decided," said Walter Perry, "is hardly the word. If I'd thought about it, I'd have realized how foolish it was to hope that it would do any good. He just hired detectives. And then he was murdered, and here I am in a beautiful jam. I don't blame Osborne for thinking I must have killed him."

Mr. Smith chuckled. "Fortunately for you, the sheriff can't figure out how anybody could have killed him. Ah . . . did anyone know about your hoax, the threatening letter? That is, of course, before the sheriff traced it to you and you admitted writing and sending it?"

"Why, yes. I was so disappointed in my uncle's reaction to receiving it, that I mentioned it to Mr. Wade and Mr. Wheeler, and to a few of the others my uncle owed royalties to. I hoped they could suggest some other idea that might work better. But they couldn't."

"Wade and Wheeler—they live in the city?"

"Yes, they're out of vaudeville now, of course. They get by doing bit parts on radio and television."

"Um-m-m," said Mr. Smith. "Well, thank you for signing the renewal on your policy. And when you are out of here, I'd like to see you again to discuss the possibility of your taking an additional policy."

"Yes, Mr. Smith, I'll be glad to discuss another policy—if I get out of this mess."

Mr. Smith smiled. "Then it seems even more definitely to the interest of the Phalanx Insurance Company to see that you are free as soon as possible."

Mr. Henry Smith drove back to the Perry house even more slowly and thoughtfully than he had driven away from it. He didn't drive quite all the way. He parked his ancient vehicle almost a quarter of a mile away, at the point where the road curved around the group of trees that gave the nearest cover.

He walked through the trees until he could see the house itself, across the open field. The sheriff was still, or again, on the roof.

Mr. Smith walked out into the open, and the sheriff saw him almost at once. Mr. Smith waved and the sheriff waved back. Mr. Smith walked on across the field to the barn, which stood between the field and the house itself.

The tall, thin man whom he had seen exercising the horse was now engaged in currying a horse.

"Mr. Merkle?" asked Mr. Smith, and the man nodded. "My name is Smith, Henry Smith. I am . . . ah . . . attempting to help the sheriff. A beautiful stallion, that gray.

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Would I be wrong in guessing that it is a cross between an Arabian and a Kentucky walking horse?"

The thin man's face lighted up. "Right, mister. I see you know horses. I been having fun with those city dicks, kidding 'em. They think, because I told 'em, that this is a Clyde, and that chestnut Arab mare is a Percheron. Found out yet who killed Mr. Perry?"

Mr. Smith stared at him. "It is just possible that we have, Mr. Merkle. It is just barely possible that you have told me how it was done, and if we know that—"

"Huh?" said the trainer. "I told you?"

"Yes," returned Mr. Smith. "Thank you."

He walked on around the barn and joined the sheriff on the roof.

Osborne grunted a welcome. He said, "I saw you the minute you came out into the open. Dammit, nobody could have crossed that field last night without being noticed."

"You said the moonlight was rather dim, did you not?"

"Yeah, the moon was low, kind of, and—let's see, was it a half moon?"

"Third quarter." said Mr. Smith. "And the men who crossed that field didn't have to come closer than a hundred yards or more until they were lost in the shadow of the barn."

The sheriff took off his hat and swabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. He said, "Sure, I ain't saying you could recognize anybody that far, but you could see— Hey, why'd you say the men who crossed that field? You mean, you think—"

"Exactly," cut in Mr. Smith, just a bit smugly. "One man could not have crossed that field last night without being noticed—*but two men could!* It seems quite absurd, I will admit, but by process of elimination, it must have been what happened."

Sheriff Osborne stared blankly.

"The two men," said Mr. Smith, "are named Wade and Wheeler. They live in the city, and you'll have no difficulty finding them because Walter Perry knows where they live. I think you'll have no difficulty proving that they did it, once you know the facts. For one thing, I think you'll find that they probably rented the . . . ah . . . wherewithal. I doubt if they have their own left, after all these years off the stage."

"Wheeler and Wade? I believe Walter mentioned those names."

"Exactly," said Mr. Smith. "They knew the setup here. And they knew that if Walter inherited Whistler and Company, they'd get the money they had coming. So they came here last night and killed Mr. Carlos Perry. They crossed that field last night right under the eyes of your city detectives."

"I'm crazy, or you are," declared Sheriff Osborne. "How?"

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Mr. Smith smiled gently. "On my way up through the house just now, I verified a wild guess. I phoned a friend of mine who has been a theatrical agent for many years. He remembered Wade and Wheeler quite well. And it's the only answer—possible because of the dim moonlight, the distance, and the ignorance of city-bred men who would think nothing of seeing a horse in a field at night when the horse should be in the barn. Who wouldn't, in fact, even see a horse, to remember it."

"You mean Wade, Wheeler—"

"Exactly," said Mr. Smith. "Wade and Wheeler, in vaudeville, were the front and back ends of a comedy horse."

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"A Retrieved Reformation" is one of O. Henry's most famous stories —and paradoxically, one of his least known. For the fame of "A Retrieved Reformation" was achieved under an entirely different title. Actually, the plot of the story was not O. Henry's own—it was given to him by Jimmy Connors, a fellow prisoner in the Ohio State Penitentiary where O. Henry served three years and three months for the embezzlement of funds from the First National Bank of Austin, Texas. (One of your Editors, during a professional stay at the University of Texas, in Austin, visited O. Henry's home in that city, and was struck by its pathetic similiarity to Walt Whitman's house in Camden, New Jersey, and Edgar Allan Poe's homes in Philadelphia and New York.)

But to get back to our main point: "A Retrieved Reformation" became famous as "Alias Jimmy Valentine" (ah, now you recognize it!), first as a successful play, then as a popular song, then as a motion picture, and finally as a radio series. (The reader might be interested to learn that your Editors, as training for their own radio series, "The Adventures of Ellery Queen," once wrote weekly scripts for "Alias Jimmy Valentine"—anonymously, of course.)

Here then is the original written version of "Alias Jimmy Valentine"—the literary acorn from which the mighty oak spread and grew . . .

A RETRIEVED REFORMATION

by O. HENRY

A GUARD CAME TO THE PRISON SHOE shop, where Jimmy Valentine was assiduously stitching uppers, and escorted him to the front office. There the warden handed Jimmy his pardon, which had been signed that morning by the governor.

Jimmy took it in a tired kind of way. He had served nearly ten months of a four-year sentence. He had expected to stay only about three months, at the longest. When a man with as many friends on the outside as Jimmy Valentine had is received in the "stir" it is hardly worth while to cut his hair.

"Now, Valentine," said the warden, "you'll go out in the morning. Brace up, and make a man of yourself. You're not a bad fellow at heart. Stop cracking safes, and live straight."

From "Roads of Destiny." © 1903 by Doubleday & Company, Inc., reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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"Me?" said Jimmy, in surprise. "Why, I never cracked a safe in my life."

"Oh, no," laughed the warden. "Of course not. Let's see, now. How was it you happened to get sent up on that Springfield job? Was it because you wouldn't prove an alibi for fear of compromising somebody in extremely high-toned society? Or was it simply a case of a mean old jury that had it in for you? It's always one or the other with you innocent victims."

"Me?" said Jimmy, still blankly virtuous. "Why, Warden, I never was in Springfield in my life!"

"Take him back, Cronin," smiled the warden, "and fix him up with outgoing clothes. Unlock him at seven in the morning, and let him come to the bull-pen. Better think over my advice, Valentine."

At a quarter past seven on the next morning Jimmy stood in the warden's outer office. He had on a suit of the villainously fitting, ready-made clothes and a pair of the stiff, squeaky shoes that the state furnishes to its discharged compulsory guests.

The clerk handed him a railroad ticket and the five-dollar bill with which the law expected him to rehabilitate himself into good citizenship and prosperity. The warden gave him a cigar, and shook hands. Valentine, 9762, was chronicled on the books "Pardoned by Governor," and Mr. James Valentine walked out into the sunshine.

Disregarding the song of the birds, the waving green trees, and the smell of the flowers, Jimmy headed straight for a restaurant. There he tasted the first sweet joys of liberty in the shape of a broiled chicken and a bottle of white wine —followed by a cigar a grade better than the one the warden had given him.

From there he proceeded leisurely to the depot. He tossed a quarter into the hat of a blind man sitting by the door, and boarded his train. Three hours set him down in a little town near the state line. He went to the café of one Mike Dolan and shook hands with Mike, who was alone behind the bar.

"Sorry we couldn't make it sooner, Jimmy, me boy," said Mike. "But we had that protest from Springfield to buck against, and the governor nearly balked. Feeling all right?"

"Fine," said Jimmy. "Got my key?"

He got his key and went upstairs, unlocking the door of a room at the rear. Everything was just as he had left it. There on the floor was still Ben Price's collar button that had been torn from that eminent detective's shirt when they had overpowered Jimmy to arrest him.

Pulling out from the wall a folding bed, Jimmy slid back a panel in the wall and dragged out a dust-covered suitcase. He opened this and gazed fondly at the finest set

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of burglar's tools in the East. It was a complete set, made of specially tempered steel, the latest designs in drills, punches, braces and bits, jimmies, clamps, and augers, with two or three novelties invented by Jimmy himself, in which he took pride.

In half an hour Jimmy went downstairs and through the café. He was now dressed in tasteful and well-fitting clothes, and carried his dusted and cleaned suitcase in his hand.

"Got anything on?" asked Mike Dolan, genially.

"Me?" said Jimmy, in a puzzled tone. "I don't understand. I'm representing the New York Amalgamated Short Snap Biscuit Cracker and Frazzled Wheat Company."

This statement delighted Mike to such an extent that Jimmy had to take a seltzer-and-milk on the spot. He never touched "hard" drinks.

A week after the release of Valentine, 9762, there was a neat job of safe burglary done in Richmond, Indiana, with no clue to the author. A scant $800 was all that was secured.

Two weeks after that a patented, improved, burglar-proof safe in Logansport was opened like a cheese to the tune of $1500.

That began to interest the rogue-catchers. Then an old-fashioned bank-safe in Jefferson City became active and threw out of its crater an eruption of banknotes amounting to $5000.

The losses were now high enough to bring the matter up into Ben Price's class of work. By comparing notes, a remarkable similarity in the methods of the burglaries was noticed. Ben Price investigated the scenes of the robberies, and was heard to remark: "That's Dandy Jim Valentine's autograph. He's resumed business. Look at that combination knob—jerked out as easy as pulling up a radish in wet weather. He's got the only clamps that can do it. And look how clean those tumblers were punched out! Jimmy never has to drill but one hole. Yes, I guess I want Mr. Valentine. He'll do his bit next time without any short-time or clemency foolishness."

Ben Price knew Jimmy's habits. He had learned them while working up the Springfield case. Long jumps, quick getaways, no confederates, and a taste for good society—these ways had helped Mr. Valentine to become noted as a successful dodger of retribution. It was given out that Ben Price had taken up the trail of the elusive cracksman, and other people with burglar-proof safes felt more at ease.

One afternoon Jimmy Valentine and his suitcase climbed out of the mailhack in Elmore, a little town five miles off the railroad down in the black-jack country of Arkansas. Jimmy, looking like an athletic young senior just home from college, went down the broad sidewalk toward the hotel.

A young lady crossed the street,

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passed him at the corner, and entered a door over which was the sign "The Elmore Bank." Jimmy Valentine looked into her eyes, forgot what he was, and became another man. She lowered her eyes and colored slightly. Young men of Jimmy's style and looks were scarce in Elmore.

Jimmy collared a boy loafing on the steps of the bank as if he were one of the stockholders and began to ask him questions about the town, feeding him dimes at intervals. By and by the young lady came out, looking royally unconscious of the young man with the suitcase, and went her way.

"Isn't that young lady Miss Polly Simpson?" asked Jimmy, with specious guile.

"Naw," said the boy. "She's Annabel Adams. Her pa owns this bank. What'd you come to Elmore for? Is that a gold watch-chain? I'm going to get a bulldog. Got any more dimes?"

Jimmy went to the Planters' Hotel, registered as Ralph D. Spencer, and engaged a room. He leaned on the desk and declared his platform to the clerk. He said he had come to Elmore to look for a location to go into business. How was the shoe business, now, in the town? He had thought of the shoe business. Was there an opening?

The clerk was impressed by the clothes and manner of Jimmy. He, himself, was something of a pattern of fashion to the thinly gilded youth of Elmore, but he now perceived his shortcomings. While trying to figure out Jimmy's manner of tying his four-in-hand he cordially gave information.

Yes, there ought to be a good opening in the shoe line. There wasn't an exclusive shoe store in the place. The dry goods and general stores handled them. Business in all lines was fairly good. Hoped Mr. Spencer would decide to locate in Elmore. He would find it a pleasant town to live in, and the people very sociable.

Mr. Spencer thought he would stop over in the town a few days and look over the situation. No, the clerk needn't call the boy. He would carry up his suitcase himself; it was rather heavy.

Mr. Ralph Spencer, the phoenix that arose from Jimmy Valentine's ashes—ashes left by the flame of a sudden and alterative attack of love—remained in Elmore, and prospered. He opened a shoe store and secured a good run of trade.

Socially he was also a success, and made many friends. And he accomplished the wish of his heart. He met Miss Annabel Adams and became more and more captivated by her charms.

At the end of a year the situation of Mr. Ralph Spencer was this: he had won the respect of the community, his shoe store was flourishing, and he and Annabel were engaged to be married in two weeks. Mr. Adams, the typical,

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plodding, country banker, approved of Spencer. Annabel's pride in him almost equaled her affection. He was as much at home in the family of Mr. Adams and that of Annabel's married sister as if he were already a member.

One day Jimmy sat down in his room and wrote this letter, which he mailed to the address of one of his old friends in St. Louis:

DEAR OLD PAL:

I want you to be at Sullivan's place, in Little Rock, next Wednesday night, at nine o'clock. I want you to wind up some little matters for me. And, also, I want to make you a present of my kit of tools. I know you'll be glad to get them—you couldn't duplicate the lot for a thousand dollars. Say, Billy, I've quit the old business—a year ago. I've got a nice store. I'm making an honest living, and I'm going to marry the finest girl on earth two weeks from now. It's the only life, Billy—the straight one. I wouldn't touch a dollar of another man's money now for a million. After I get married I'm going to sell out and go West, where there won't be so much danger of having old scores brought up against me. I tell you, Billy, she's an angel. She believes in me; and I wouldn't do another crooked thing for the whole world. Be sure to be at Sully's, for I must see you.

Your old friend,

JIMMY

On the Monday night after Jimmy wrote this letter, Ben Price jogged unobtrusively into Elmore in a livery buggy. He lounged about town in his quiet way until he found out what he wanted to know. From the drug store across the street from Spencer's shoe store he got a good look at Ralph D. Spencer.

"Going to marry the banker's daughter are you, Jimmy?" said Ben to himself, softly. "Well, I don't know!"

The next morning Jimmy took breakfast at the Adamses. He was going to Little Rock that day to order his wedding suit and buy something nice for Annabel. That would be the first time he had left town since he came to Elmore. It had been more than a year now since those last professional "jobs," and he thought he could safely venture out.

After breakfast quite a family party went downtown together—Mr. Adams, Annabel, Jimmy, and Annabel's married sister with her two little girls, aged five and nine. They came by the hotel where Jimmy still boarded, and he ran up to his room and brought down his suitcase. Then they went on to the bank. There stood Jimmy's horse and buggy and Dolph Gibson, who was going to drive him over to the railroad station.

All went inside the high, carved-oak railings into the banking room—Jimmy included, for Mr. Adams's

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future son-in-law was welcome anywhere. The clerks were pleased to be greeted by the good-looking, agreeable young man who was going to marry Miss Annabel.

Jimmy set his suitcase down. Annabel, whose heart was bubbling with happiness and lively youth, put on Jimmy's hat and picked up the suitcase. "Wouldn't I make a nice drummer?" said Annabel. "My, Ralph, how heavy it is. Feels like it was full of gold bricks."

"Lot of nickel-plated shoehorns in there," said Jimmy coolly, "that I'm going to return. Thought I'd save express charges by taking them up. I'm getting economical."

The Elmore Bank had just put in a new safe and vault. Mr. Adams was very proud of it, and insisted on an inspection by everyone. The vault was a small one, but it had a new patented door. It fastened with three solid steel bolts thrown simultaneously with a single handle, and had a time lock.

Mr. Adams beamingly explained its workings to Mr. Spencer, who showed a courteous but not too intelligent interest. The two children, May and Agatha, were delighted by the shining metal and funny clock and knobs.

While they were thus engaged, Ben Price sauntered in and leaned on his elbow, looking casually inside between the railings. He told the teller that he didn't want anything; he was just waiting for a man he knew.

Suddenly there were screams from the women, and a commotion. Unperceived by the elders, May, the nine-year-old girl, in a spirit of play, had shut Agatha in the vault. She had then shot the bolts and turned the knob of the combination as she had seen Mr. Adams do.

The old banker sprang to the handle and tugged at it for a moment.

"The door can't be opened," he groaned. "The clock hasn't been wound nor the combination set."

Agatha's mother screamed again, hysterically.

"Hush!" said Mr. Adams, raising his trembling hand. "All be quiet for a moment. Agatha!" he called as loudly as he could. "Listen to me." During the following silence they could just hear the faint sound of the child wildly shrieking in the dark vault in a panic of terror.

"My precious darling!" wailed the mother. "She will die of fright! Open the door! Oh, break it open! Can't you men do something?"

"There isn't a man nearer than Little Rock who can open that door," said Mr. Adams, in a shaky voice. "My God! Spencer, what shall we do? That child—she can't stand it long in there. There isn't enough air, and, besides, she'll go into convulsions from fright."

Agatha's mother, frantic now, beat the door of the vault with her hands. Somebody wildly suggested dynamite. Annabel turned to Jim-

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my, her large eyes full of anguish, but not yet despairing. To a woman nothing seems quite impossible to the powers of the man she worships.

"Can't you do something, Ralph —*try*, won't you?"

He looked at her with a queer, soft smile in his keen eyes.

"Annabel," he said, "give me that rose you are wearing, will you?"

Hardly believing that she heard him aright, she unpinned the bud from the bosom of her dress and placed it in his hand. Jimmy stuffed it into his vest pocket, threw off his coat, and pulled up his shirt sleeves. With that act Ralph D. Spencer passed away and Jimmy Valentine took his place.

"Get way from the door, all of you," he commanded, shortly.

He set his suitcase on the table and opened it out flat. From that time on he seemed to be unconscious of the presence of anyone else. He laid out the shining, queer implements swiftly and orderly, whistling softly to himself as he always did when at work. In a deep silence and immovable, the others watched him as if under a spell.

In a minute Jimmy's pet drill was biting smoothly into the steel door. In ten minutes—breaking his own burglarious record—he threw back the bolts and opened the door.

Agatha, almost collapsed, but safe, was gathered into her mother's arms.

Jimmy Valentine put on his coat, and walked outside the railings toward the front door. As he went he thought he heard a faraway voice that he once knew call "Ralph!" But he never hesitated.

At the door a big man stood somewhat in his way.

"Hello, Ben!" said Jimmy, still with his strange smile. "Got around at last, have you? Well, let's go. I don't know that it makes much difference, now."

Then Ben Price acted strangely.

"Guess you're mistaken, Mr. Spencer," he said. "Don't believe I recognize you. Your buggy's waiting for you, ain't it?"

And Ben Price turned and strolled down the street.

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a new novelette by

PHYLLIS BENTLEY

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	
TITLE:	***A Midsummer Night's Crime***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Miss Marian Phipps
LOCALE:	Stratford-upon-Avon, England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Have you ever visited Stratford-upon-Avon? If not, you have a delightful Crook's Tour ahead of you—although we hasten to say that while Shakespeare's birthplace is depicted with charming authenticity, the criminal events are the purest fiction.*

"I ADORE STRATFORD!" EXCLAIMED Miss Phipps, taking her foot off the accelerator as the spire of the church which houses Shakespeare's bones came into sight across the green Warwickshire fields. She reflected joyously on the two tickets for the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre which nestled in her purse. *"Soul of the Age! The applause! delight! the wonder of our stage! My Shakespeare, rise!"* quoted Miss Phipps rapturously, *"Sweet Swan of Avon—"*

At this moment a van drew level with her and prepared to pass. Miss Phipps frowned. It was an insult to her new little Cardinal (in two shades of rose) that she should be passed by a small tradesman's van. Flouting the voice of conscience and the Highway Code, she put her foot down firmly on the accelerator. The Cardinal leaped forward, and Miss Phipps had a swift but compelling view of the driver of the van and his companion.

The driver, who leaned forward to scowl at her, was a roughish type in a turtle-neck sweater of dirty grey, with the largest, ugliest, most peculiarly shaped ears Miss Phipps had ever seen; his companion wore a mauve silk skirt, a rather too

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decorative tie, and had varnished black hair.

Miss Phipps kept her foot hard down, but the van gained and presently drew level again. For a few uncomfortable seconds the van and the Cardinal rode side by side and Miss Phipps had time to observe the vehicle, which was of a rather unusual kind. It seemed to be a box made of cream-painted boards, on which some biblical texts appeared in large black capitals. *PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD,* read Miss Phipps. *THE HOUR COMETH. EXCEPT YE REPENT YE SHALL PERISH.*

"A Gospel van!" exclaimed Miss Phipps.

She had heard of these itinerant preachers, but had never met one before. It was not a form of missionary activity which commended itself to Miss Phipps, but she had too much respect for the religion of others to scoff at the van, or to hinder its work by refusing to yield the right of way. She was raising her foot from the Cardinal's accelerator when the van rendered this unnecessary by suddenly shooting ahead.

"Curious," said Miss Phipps.

The back of the van was now presented to her view. Its glossy doors read:

THOU	*BLESSED*
SHALL	*ARE*
DELIVER	*THE*
ME	*MEEK*

"Curiouser," said Miss Phipps.

Then she rebuked herself for her cynicism. One could be truly religious without handsome ears or a knowledge of grammar, and silk shirts were not a crime, particularly in this lovely summer weather.

The van flew round a bend in the road and disappeared, and Miss Phipps drove on to Stratford-upon-Avon.

"I *adore* Stratford," said a pretty, drawling, petted voice of a type which always sent shudders down Miss Phipps' spine because it so often belonged to a discontented person. "I *adore* Stratford, Michael, but I do think this is a most *disgusting* hotel."

"It was you who wanted to come here," said a muffled male voice.

"I can't help it if I don't like it, can I?"

Miss Phipps sighed. Her novelist's psychology had not misled her, she reflected, as she drew the Cardinal carefully into line. Only a very fretful spirit would find fault with the Hathaway Hotel, for it was certainly one of the best in the town.

"Look at this alleged garage space, I ask you," continued the petted voice. "How we're ever going to get *out* of it again, I don't *know*. Oh, and here's *another* car to block us in!"

She turned and scowled at Miss Phipps, who smiled back cheerfully as she got out of her car and locked the doors. Yes, just the type

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I'd imagined, decided Miss Phipps: fair-haired, pretty, slender, with rather exceptionally good legs, dressed in a charming blue and green summer frock cut very low, but with a face rather too liberally made up; and she was wearing entirely too much costume jewellery (necklets and bracelets) for really good taste. Also, Miss Phipps observed with her novelist's eye, whereas the two young men and the second young woman, a pleasant bright-eyed brunette, were all helping to take the luggage from their old but well-cared-for little car, the blonde girl stood aside and did not lift a finger to help them.

"Spoiled and selfish," reflected Miss Phipps sadly. Aloud she said, "Yes, these old inn yards present quite a parking problem, especially now that modern cars have grown to such a length. I think I've left you space enough, however," she continued, stepping aside to estimate this more accurately.

"Why, it's Miss Phipps!" exclaimed the shorter, plumper, and fairer of the young men, withdrawing his head from the luggage compartment.

Miss Phipps looked affable but interrogative.

"Don't you remember me? But of course you wouldn't. But surely you remember the Laire murder trial? In Northshire, you know? Your niece's husband's partner? You pinned it on him through a member of the Laire Thespians, don't you remember? Our amateur dramatic society, you know. I was doing a production of Henry V for them—"

"Tony Harris!" exclaimed Miss Phipps.

"That's right. Ruth, Linda, Michael—this is Miss Marian Phipps. Detective, novelist, and detective-novelist. Sorry—I've introduced you the wrong way round. My sister Linda," continued Tony, indicating the blonde. "Her husband Michael Lynn. Ruth Armstrong. We're all Laire Thespians."

"We're doing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for our summer show, so we've all come to see the Stratford production," explained Michael.

"Tony's producing, and Linda and I are doing Helena and Hermia," added Ruth.

"How do you do?" concluded the blonde coldly, tilting her pretty little nose in the air.

"She hates anyone but herself to receive any notice," thought Miss Phipps, shaking hands warmly all round. "Poor Michael."

Michael was a kind, honest-looking young man, tallish, with ordinary brown hair and ordinary brown eyes; but that was the trouble—he was too ordinary ever to satisfy the ambitious Linda, and at present his eyes showed unhappiness.

"What about a drink to celebrate our meeting?" suggested Miss Phipps.

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This was well received, and they all trooped into the Hathaway by the back entrance, Michael carrying Miss Phipps' luggage and Linda's as well as his own. They then separated to their several rooms after agreeing to meet in the bar at six o'clock prompt—but not before Miss Phipps heard Linda complain, "I don't see *why* we should have such a *wretched* little room when we booked *ages* ago; you must excuse my *saying* this, Michael, but I really *don't*."

Miss Phipps of course understood the reason perfectly: the Hathaway was an expensive hotel and Michael's resources did not stretch beyond modest accommodations.

The Hathaway, like all other Stratford hotels, served dinner at a quarter past six for the benefit of theatre-goers, and although they had barely a hundred yards to walk, most guests were punctual, for they liked to get to the theatre early—the theatre exercised so great a fascination that nearly everyone wanted to share in its excitement as quickly as possible.

Miss Phipps came down promptly at the dinner hour, and Tony and Ruth followed her very shortly. Michael appeared later, but without Linda. He looked wretched, and chain-smoked three cigarettes without speaking. They drank a round at Miss Phipps' expense, and a round at Tony's; then it was time to dine.

"You'd better go in without us. I'll wait here for Linda," said Michael, looking miserably at his watch.

"Don't make it too late, old man," said Tony.

"I'm not sure whether Linda will come to the play at all," blurted Michael.

"What, after coming all this way to see it?" exclaimed Ruth.

"Is it the same trouble as before?"

"Yes. She seems as if she just can't get over it."

"I'm afraid my sister isn't showing at her best," said Tony, turning to Miss Phipps. "You see, she hoped to play Titania for the Laire Thespians and she hasn't been cast for it."

"And wasn't it a reasonable hope?" said Linda, suddenly swishing up behind them.

She certainly looked extremely pretty and fairy-like in her ethereal white dress, which billowed quite delightfully from her small waist. It was spangled in some way with silver, which her silver shoes agreeably matched. The whole effect was striking, though perhaps a little over-elaborate for an ordinary mid-week occasion.

Miss Phipps found herself hoping that Michael's income could stand all this finery, but from the appearance of his car she had a shrewd notion that it couldn't.

"Why can't you be satisfied with Helena, Lindy?" said her brother with some irritation. "It's a longer part."

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"Oh, don't be silly, Tony. I *wanted* to play *Titania. Any* casting director but Michael would have cast *me* for it."

"I can't give every leading part in the season to my own wife!" exclaimed Michael in obvious agony.

"I don't know what Miss Phipps will think of your *callous* disregard for my *happiness,* Michael," said Linda.

"I could not love thee (Dear) so much, Lov'd I not honour more." murmured Miss Phipps.

A tide of hot but delicate colour flooded Linda's clear cheeks.

"Please don't let Michael's excessive preoccupation with his very unimportant responsibilities make us ridiculous," she said in a haughty tone.

"Nobody can make one ridiculous but oneself," said Miss Phipps briskly.

Linda gave her a glance of unmitigated hate and led the way into the dining-room.

"Have a drink first, dear," urged Michael.

"No."

"You could take it in with you."

"No!"

Miss Phipps firmly rejected the attempts of the head waiter, who was short of tables, to seat her with the Laire Thespians, and was placed in a corner alone; it might be selfish of her, but she declined to have her evening at Stratford spoiled by Linda. For the same reason she nipped out very quickly after dinner, hoping to avoid the Laire party.

"I adore Stratford!" said Miss Phipps, strolling along happily through the balmy summer air.

Beneath the pink and white chestnuts in full flower, with the river Avon flowing softly, decked by the pure white elegance of swans, a thousand people were making their way eagerly to the great theatre. There were people of all ages, religions, colours, nationalities, from all over the world. Or at least, thought Miss Phipps, shaking her head, from all over the free world. There were Indians in their lovely gauzy saris; there were French, Germans, Italians, Japanese, Malays, Americans, Canadians, Australians, Africans, Spaniards—oh, there was just everybody!

All of them looked happy and excited; all of them were talking about Shakespeare. "This is the fifth time I've seen the *Dream"*—"I'm told the rustics are particularly good"—"The *Observer* critique was rather severe"—"It's the best children's play ever written"—"You see, my dear fellow, it's such an essentially English play; a wood near Athens is all my hat, it's English countryside really"—"Is it a play to be taken seriously? Is there any philosophic significance?" —"No, no, just sit back and enjoy the sheer fun and beauty of the thing" —"I always think this place is the quintessence of the drama."

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Miss Phipps, as a novelist enjoying everybody else's enjoyment as well as her own, could have wept for sheer bliss.

Alas, she had not counted on the difference in walking speed between the young and the old—the Laire party caught up with her and it was only by slipping away onto the grass that Miss Phipps avoided them. Even so she heard occasional echoes of their talk, for Linda's high voice carried through the babble of the crowd.

"An *ugly* building—outdated now, quite *old-fashioned* really . . ."

"*Far* too many swans—they're trying to get *rid* of them . . ."

"I *do* think they might do something about these *pebbles* . . ."

"Quite a *cold* breeze . . ."

To Miss Phipps' regret they all reached the great foyer, and queued to buy the huge scarlet programmes, together. Linda was now in the process of delivering a scathing attack on the choice and dating of the five plays to be performed that year.

"It's *impossible* to see *all* the plays in *one* visit unless you stay for*ever*," she said. "Why do they so *often* perform the *same* play on *consecutive* nights?"

Michael mildly suggested the problems of staging which such an arrangement might minimize.

"Well, I think it's *too* bad. And what a draught there is in this foyer!"

"You ought to have brought a coat or at least a stole, Linda," suggested the sensible Ruth, looking at the expanse of bare, though undeniably pretty, back which Linda was offering to the evening air, and glad, Miss Phipps thought, of the opportunity to terminate Linda's diatribe, which was attracting unfavourable glances from other members of the queue.

"Yes, I do hope you won't catch cold, darling," said Michael apprehensively. "I wanted you to bring your coat."

Miss Phipps guessed at once that Linda's coat was not equal in chic to her dress.

"Would you like me to slip back to the hotel and fetch it?" went on Michael.

"No."

"It wouldn't take me more than a few minutes," pleaded Michael.

"Don't *fuss* so, Michael!" said Linda crossly.

"You needn't have frozen in your best bib and tucker tonight, Linda," said Tony in a brotherly tone. "*She* won't be here until tomorrow."

"How do you know?" said Linda quickly.

She spoke with real eagerness, forgetting her languid drawl, so that Miss Phipps wondered what woman could have aroused in her such unaffected interest.

"They told me at the reception desk at the Hathaway."

"You might have told *me*," said Linda angrily, with an involuntary

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glance at her fluffy skirts, which in spite of their modern uncrushability would no doubt lose some of their freshness by being squashed in a theatre seat for several hours.

The five minute bell sounded.

"Well, here we go!" exclaimed Tony.

A smile of excited happiness spread over every face, even Linda's, and the crowd surged forward. The Laire party went up to the dress circle, Miss Phipps noticed, while she had treated herself to an expensive stall.

In the moments before the play began, Miss Phipps discovered on her right two Oriental gentlemen of great decorum, who did not obtrude speech upon her but bowed and smiled in a welcoming way as she pushed pass them. She was vexed with herself for having made this necessary by approaching her stall from the wrong direction; she had imagined her place nearer the centre and was just a trifle disappointed to find herself only one seat from the left aisle. But with postal booking, and a theatre habitually filled every night of the season, one just had to take what the box-office sent and be grateful.

Miss Phipps then turned to her left and received the shock of her life.

Her left-hand neighbour was Mr. Mauve Shirt from the Gospel van.

"If I used a coincidence like this in a story, Ellery Queen would never swallow it," thought Miss Phipps. "But in real life such things are always happening."

She smiled affably at Mr. Mauve (as she decided to call him), and received a somewhat chilly and uncertain contortion of the features in reply.

"You must excuse my behaving as if I knew you," said Miss Phipps in her friendliest tone—after all her white hair defended her from any imputation of attempting a pick-up—"but I saw you in your Gospel van this afternoon. On the Warwick road."

Mauve Shirt said nothing. He merely tightened his lips and glowered.

"You passed me. I was driving a little Cardinal in two shades of rose," persisted Miss Phipps, somewhat abashed and feeling the need (though she knew it was absurd) to defend herself. "Don't you remember?"

Mauve made a slight movement which might have been taken, by a friendly critic, as an inclination of his head.

"Is your mission part of some spiritual campaign?" enquired Miss Phipps. "Or is it entirely undenominational and independent?"

"It's nothing to do with me, see?" broke out Mauve Shirt in shrill Cockney tones. "It's my friend's wot I was driving with. S'nothing to do with me reelly, see."

"Oh, I see," said Miss Phipps. She felt at once relieved and amused—relieved to know that the spiritual

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destinies of Stratford were not to be linked with Mr. Mauve and amused by his perky speech. "An interesting experience for you, no doubt."

Mauve Shirt gave a snort so derisive that Miss Phipps was startled, and turned to give him a longer look. But at that moment the stage lights came on and there was applause for the simply majesty of the steps and columns which set the scene. Theseus and Hippolyta entered with dignity and an attendant court, Miss Phipps was enthralled —and Mauve Shirt was forgotten.

The play flew along on the iridescent wings of Shakespeare's exquisite poetry. Titania was, of course, adorable, Oberon magnificently sinister. Ordinary mortals, it seemed, were clothed in Grecian white, royalties in white with scarlet cloaks and ornaments; rustics in whatever it had pleased God to send to their obscure abodes, thought Miss Phipps, paraphrasing Gogol; fairies in a most ethereal, incredibly transparent and beautiful tulle of deepest indigo blue, so that their every movement seemed to shimmer moonlight.

As the audience rose to go out for coffee at the interval, Miss Phipps explained this sartorial scheme to the Oriental gentlemen, who were scanning their programmes with an earnest intensity which seemed to implore guidance. They all waited, standing, for the crowd in the aisle to diminish. The Orientals were a little shocked, it seemed, by the frivolous modern levity with which Helena and Hermia were being played—such tit-for-tatting females were not their idea of Shakespeare's heroines.

"That's what *I* say," broke in an American voice, which emanated from a blue-haired lady in the row behind. "It's throwing Shakespeare out the window, that's what I say, but my niece here says this is the first time those two girls ever made any sense to her, and she has a point there, you know."

"She has indeed," approved Miss Phipps. "What is your view?" she inquired, turning to Mr. Mauve Shirt.

"Well, it's not wot I was led to expeck from Shakespeare, and that's a fack," said Mauve. "That Bottom fellow is the man for my money—he's the smart one."

At this moment the crowd yielded an opening and they all surged out into the aisle. Mauve at once slipped away like an eel and vanished.

"I'm sure she's not here tonight," said the American lady to her niece.

Miss Phipps, intrigued by this second reference to an unknown woman of importance, turned round and enquired courteously, "Excuse me, but who were you expecting?"

"Why, our Miranda Lee, of course," was the reply. "Maybe she isn't as well known to you Britishers as she is to us, but—"

"Oh, but she is!" exclaimed Miss Phipps.

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"—in our country we regard her as a very great actress," concluded the American lady in a rather hurt tone.

"So do we. I've seen several of her films," said Miss Phipps hastily. "She has a very real talent."

"She's planning to do a Shakespearean series on American television, so she's visiting Stratford for new production ideas," explained the blue-haired tourist, mollified.

"At the hotel it was expected that she would arrive here tomorrow."

"Is that so? Do you hear that, Monica? Miranda Lee is expected tomorrow."

"Which hotel would that be?" asked the crisp young niece eagerly.

"The Hathaway."

"My niece would naturally like to see Miss Lee," said the American lady. "She is something of a heroine on the college campus, you know."

"I understand," said Miss Phipps. They exchanged smiles, and understood each other to have the same views on the charming susceptibility of youth.

Miss Phipps went out to the terrace overhanging the river. It was a breath-taking spectacle. Dusk was just falling, stars began to gleam, and in the darkening Avon the lights of the theatre and the distant bridge were softly reflected. A few belated swans and a solitary boat gave variety to the scene. Happy people in gay clothes crowded the terrace and balcony, talking with animation, not of private grievances nor public problems, but of the greatest poet of all time.

Mr. Mauve Shirt was leaning over the railings in the far corner. Miss Phipps smiled a little at the sight, and feeling happy and dashing, went in to the snack bar and bought herself, not coffee but a youthful glass of orangeade. She was imbibing this through a straw with considerable gusto when over the rim of her glass she caught sight of the Laire party, seated at a distant table. They all looked more cheerful than Miss Phipps had yet seen them, and Miss Phipps, feeling good will toward all men, waved a greeting and made her way to them.

"And what do you think of this way of playing the lovers?" enquired Miss Phipps. "It brightens the girls up a good deal, don't you think?"

"Yes, indeed. There's a lot more scope in Helena than Linda thought," said Tony. "You must see that, Lindy."

"Small thanks to Michael," said Linda, pouting. But she was clearly pleased. "Ruth doesn't like it," she added.

"Oh, yes, I do," said Ruth quickly. "It's only that I doubt my ability to play the part that way. It's Linda's line, not mine."

"I should very much like to see the Laire production," said Miss Phipps diplomatically.

The bell rang and the audience

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trooped back into the theatre. Mr. Mauve arrived in his seat late and a trifle breathless, and seemed, Miss Phipps thought, rather bored with the proceedings until the rustics' play at the end, when he applauded Bottom's playing of Pyramus very heartily. The fairies spoke the lovely epilogue and left the stage empty in moonlight; the curtains came down and went up again many times while applause thundered from all over the house; and then the national anthem brought the audience to their feet.

Miss Phipps went out with the crowd streaming away in eager talk beneath the lighted chestnut trees. The darling *Dream* was over.

"I adore Stratford!" said Miss Phipps, lolling in a deck-chair beside the gentle Avon next morning.

The sun shone brightly, the river glittered; families with young children and every imaginable breed of dog disported themselves on the grass, the customary early morning queue outside the theatre hoping for tickets for the evening performance had just dispersed, the theatre cafés were crowded. Rowing-craft flew up and down the river, ice-cream was sold from a nearby float, and the big motor-boats waited throbbing till their quota of passengers should be complete.

Miss Phipps' happiness was not quite perfect, however; she had had a theatre ticket for last night, and she had a theatre ticket for tomorrow night, but she had no ticket for tonight. It had seemed absurd, months ago when she booked, to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* twice, on two consecutive evenings, so she had booked once for the *Dream* and once for *Coriolanus*.

But now that she was here in Stratford, she had come under the spell; and she was beginning to feel that she would give a great deal to be going to the theatre again tonight. On an impulse she climbed out of her deck-chair and approached the box-office. But there were no tickets left, not even standing-room tickets.

"Oh, well!" said Miss Phipps wistfully.

To cheer herself up she decided to take a trip on one of the motor-boats. There was one called *Titania,* and one called *George Washington* ("Why?" wondered Miss Phipps), and one called *Swan of Avon.* It was *Titania,* however, which bore her downstream to a superb view of the church. At this point the engine was stopped and the boat drifted while fares were collected. Miss Phipps' eyes wandered, and in a quiet distant field on the far bank she was suddenly sure she saw the Gospel van parked by a grassy slope.

"I am sure I saw it," mused Miss Phipps. "That's one of those odd locations which mean the opposite of what they say. *I'm sure I saw it* means really that I'm not sure at all. Why should the van be there? How

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did it get there? Was it really there? I shall walk along the left bank and find out."

When she stepped off the boat, however, it occurred to her that its name, *Titania,* was a good omen; surely it meant that she would see Titania tonight. Miss Phipps really despised all such superstitious fancies, but her longing for this to be a true portent was so great that she visited the box-office again—in vain.

"Serves me right," said Miss Phipps regretfully. "I should stick to facts, not fancies."

So she trotted off across the bridge and along the path on the far bank, to check whether the presence of the Gospel van in a remote field was fact or fancy.

It was fact; but Miss Phipps had a good deal of trouble to verify it. She turned into one or two narrow lanes and climbed one or two fences before she actually set eyes on the van, for it had been parked—"Accidentally? Intentionally? Skillfully?" wondered Miss Phipps—behind a grassy knoll.

Only from one or two widely separated spots where trees and slope connived could the van to be seen. Miss Phipps approached the gate leading into the field, with the intention of walking past the van towards the river bank, for she was curious to know how a Gospel van carried on its mission from so remote a position. One could not harangue a crowd that distance.

But perhaps the van was driven back into Stratford when the urge to sermonize overtook the man with the ugly ears. The gate clicked beneath Miss Phipps' hand and the sound must have been audible in the van, for when Miss Phipps turned towards the field again after closing the gate, the man with the ugly ears stood by the back wheel. From this distance his ears were not, of course, clearly visible, but his dirty turtle-necked sweater and something in the way he stood and looked at Miss Phipps convinced her that he was the same man.

Miss Phipps paused. She took a step forward into the field. The man, motionless and silent, regarded her. Miss Phipps hesitated. The man took a step towards her. Miss Phipps turned and fled.

She was heartily ashamed of herself for doing so.

"Disgusting cowardice!" she told herself angrily. "The onset of old age! You'll be afraid of cows next! A perfectly harmless, well-meaning citizen—a bit of a crank, perhaps, but doubtless a truly religious man—and you run away from him as if he were a thug!"

"He *is* a thug," replied Miss Phipps' inner self in a subdued tone. "His whole personality is teaming with menace. As for that Gospel van, I don't believe a word of it! The way he looked at me!"

She glanced over her shoulder apprehensively, and quickened her step. Though she had now reached

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the river bank, a good many of the visitors had gone to lunch and this side of the Avon seemed quiet and lonely. To her relief, the ferry was working; she crossed thankfully to the theatre side. She felt quite nervous and shaken, and accepted this as an excuse to lunch in the theatre restaurant.

As there was no matinee that afternoon, the terrace restaurant was not its usual seething mass of theatre-goers waving scarlet programmes; only a few tables were occupied and Miss Phipps easily secured a place. Under the influence of the good food and charming décor (white, black, and shocking pink), Miss Phipps grew calmer; her heart quietened, her powers of observation returned.

The head waiter now ushered into the restaurant, with great respect, a party of three. There was a man whom Miss Phipps recognized as one of the important theatre officials; there was another man, tall, handsome, dark, highly silvered at the temples, elegantly dressed in grey with a white carnation in his button-hole; there was a woman who Miss Phipps knew at once must be Miranda Lee.

Oh, yes, there was no doubt of it —she was Miranda Lee. Although she was dressed in jeans and sweater, with a band of white chiffon tied carelessly round her blonde hair, her beauty blazed, and she had that look, indefinable but unmistakable, of world-wide celebrity. Her aquiline face, her wonderful pale glossy hair, her exquisite figure, her starry violet eyes, her friendly smile revealing how perfectly at ease she was in every milieu —as Miss Phipps observed all these, she felt a pang for Linda. This was what the poor child wished to be and never would achieve; her small-town prettiness was a candle to the sun of Miranda's beauty.

"But candles are very charming and useful things to have about the house," reflected Miss Phipps. "Easier to live with—if they are content to remain candles."

All the same she could not keep her eyes from Miranda. And a certain regret crept into her gaze.

"How difficult it always is to properly assess people of another nationality," she thought sadly.

The tall handsome man, whom Miranda called Maurice, was to Miss Phipps, indubitably and at once, a fake. Quite a few of the other guests in the restaurant must have thought the same, especially the men, as Miss Phipps saw from their embarrassed looks. The Official showed by his chilly politeness when he addressed Maurice that he despised him. Even the Laire contingent, provincial though they were, reflected Miss Phipps, would not have taken long to assess Maurice as a phony. Michael and Ruth would have seen through him in an instant, Tony in an hour—even Linda would have suspected him in a day or two.

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But here was this gorgeous Miranda girl, who must have met men of every kind in her seven years of fame, taken in by this shoddy piece of work simply because he sported what she probably thought was a genuine Oxford accent.

"Smooth," thought Miss Phipps, scowling at Maurice resentfully. "Clever. Insinuating. A cadger. What is the girl thinking of? Of course," she admitted, "one can hardly blame dear Maurice for making up to Miranda. What man wouldn't, if he had the chance? It's she who ought to have more *sense*. But there," repeated Miss Phipps sadly, "it's as I say. She'd see through him at once if he were her fellow-countryman."

Alas, Maurice continued to describe the vicissitudes of their drive down from London in Miranda's powerful hired car in his liquid, resonant, imitation-upper-class tones and Miranda continued to turn those marvellous eyes admiringly upon him.

"Moving accidents by flood and field," snorted Miss Phipps. "It's an old dodge, but as Shakespeare knew, it always works—it catches the Desdemonas."

She felt so vexed that she did not wait for coffee, but stalked out and went back to the Hathaway in a huff. The result of all this—of sitting hours in the fresh air, a boat trip, a walk, a fright, a big meal, and no coffee—was that when she sat down in her bedroom and picked up a detective novel, she fell asleep and did not wake till it was late afternoon.

By the time she had had a cup of tea and was strolling beneath the chestnut trees again, the car-parks were filling, the coaches arriving, the crowds already beginning to arrive for the evening performance.

In the distance she saw the Laire party, still in day clothes, and waved to them. They turned and came towards her.

"You're still here, then?" said Miss Phipps, a little surprised after Linda's angry harangue the previous day.

"Oh, yes. We're here till Sunday, I'm glad to say," said Michael.

"The boys took two days' leave," said Ruth.

"We're seeing the *Dream* again tonight—we came to *study* the production," said Tony earnestly.

"By the way, Linda," said Miss Phipps, "your Miranda Lee has arrived.. I saw her at lunch in the theatre restaurant."

"What was she wearing?" asked Linda eagerly.

Miss Phipps told her. Linda's face clouded with disappointment.

"Never mind—she'll be *en grande tenue* for the theatre tonight, I'm sure," said Miss Phipps. Linda's face brightened. "Oh, how I *wish* I had a ticket for tonight!" mourned Miss Phipps. "How foolish it was of me not to get one."

"You might still get in," said Tony with sympathy. "There's al-

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ways a queue for cancellations, you know—tickets sent back at the last minute. Sometimes motor coach trips will bring back as many as six! But you'd have to go now—the queue's already forming."

Miss Phipps hesitated.

"Would you like me to go and stand for you, Miss Phipps?" offered Michael. "I'll gladly do so."

"You'd miss your dinner, Michael!" Linda protested.

Michael muttered something about that being of no consequence. Miss Phipps made up her mind.

"You're a kind boy, Michael," she said, "but I'll queue for myself, thank you."

"You'll miss your dinner," said Ruth.

"I ate a big lunch."

"Why not buy a snack and take it along with you?" suggested Tony.

"Why don't *we* buy her a snack and take it to her in the queue?" suggested Michael. "Yes, that's what we'll do. You go straight to the queue now, Miss Phipps, and we'll come to you. Girls, you go along to the Hathaway and get dressed. We'll follow later."

"Don't you dare to be late, Michael," said Linda warningly.

Miss Phipps, excited and gleeful, found herself twelfth in the queue which began on the settee in the foyer and gradually spread out through the door and round the side of the building.

"Even if I don't get a seat for the performance," she decided, munching on a sausage roll, "it's worth it as a spectacle."

For, standing at one side in a fixed position, she saw and heard more clearly than before, the polyglot audience as it poured through the great doors.

At last it was seven o'clock and the cancellations began to come in. Miss Phipps moved to tenth in the queue. Ninth. Seventh. Fifth. A young man ahead took a cancelled standing-room ticket, and Miss Phipps was then second in the line.

The Laire party arrived. Linda in her white and silver had an unhappy yearning expression on her face, and Miss Phipps did not need to be told that she had seen Miranda Lee in the Hathaway dining-room. The other three congratulated Miss Phipps on her good chance of securing a ticket. The five minute bell rang.

"We'd better be getting to our seats," said Michael.

"Oh, no! Let's wait and see her come in," said Linda.

"But why, if it makes you unhappy to see her?"

"Don't be silly, Michael! She *doesn't* make me unhappy!" said Linda, stamping her foot.

"Well, I'm going in. Come along, Ruth," said Tony impatiently.

They had just crossed the emptying foyer and were mounting the steps when Miranda Lee arrived. Maurice accompanied her, a red carnation in the lapel of his dinner

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jacket. Miranda was certainly worth waiting for, thought Miss Phipps, as the actress glided across the foyer to the officials waiting to receive her, with the floating gait which was one of her special graces.

As Miss Phipps had prophesied, she was *en grande tenue*. Like Linda she wore white and silver, but the similarity of colour scheme only made the difference between the girls more cruel; the diamonds at Miranda's throat and wrists, the superbly tailored bodice, the white chiffon which swirled about her shoulders, the mere cobwebs of silver thread which were her shoes —all pointed to the difference between the Parisian couturier and the Laire dressmaker, the famous beauty and the pretty little girl. Linda stood wide-eyed, the corners of her mouth drooping wistfully.

"Poor Linda!" thought Miss Phipps with a pang.

Michael evidently had the same feeling, for under the guise of urging his wife towards the stairs he put his arm around her protectively.

At this moment the girl from the box-office who had been issuing the cancellations to the queue suddenly appeared before Miss Phipps, beaming, with four back-stalls tickets in her hand. Nothing could have pleased Miss Phipps better: she had a place, yet need feel no remorse in taking it since she was not the last to benefit.

She paid and rushed to her stall just a few seconds before the performance began. The last thing she saw in the auditorium before the lights faded was Mr. Mauve Shirt down in front, sitting in the same left-aisle seat he had occupied last night.

"Curiouser, and curiouser,' thought Miss Phipps.

She forgot Mr. Mauve until the end of the interval, but then remembered his late and breathless return to his seat after the interval last night. Of course drinks, coffee cloakroom, might easily have detained him, but Miss Phipps standing at the back of the stalls and watching shrewdly, saw that he was still absent, again late in returning.

On impulse she left the auditorium, pushed through the crowd beating back in the reverse direction, and went out through the bar towards the darkening terrace. The bar, fast emptying, was almost cleared by the time Miss Phipps reached the outer door. The terrace was quite empty—except for Mr Mauve, who in the dim far corner was leaning over the railing.

"So you're here again tonight?" called Miss Phipps cheerfully, advancing upon him.

Mauve gave a violent start and turned towards her.

"Wot if I am?" he cried. "No business of yours, lady, is it?"

Miss Phipps had never seen a cornered rat, but what she saw now was what she had always imagined. From a perky little Cockney, Mauve

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had turned into something dangerous. His eyes had a sudden reddish gleam, his small pale face was contorted and savage.

"Er, no," said Miss Phipps, halting suddenly. "I was just interested, that's all. Because—"

"Then keep out," said Mauve Shirt fiercely. "Out of my way, see?"

He looked round him. The terrace was empty. Miss Phipps suddenly realized that it was, indeed, quite horribly empty. She was afraid to turn her back on him. She thought of screaming, but doubted if the bar attendants would hear her in time.

She saw that Mauve was aware of her distress. He also perceived the emptiness of the terrace. His little rat eyes gleamed. He grinned. He put his hand in his pocket and advanced upon her.

"Hi-de-ho!" called a cheerful American voice from the wire gate at the other end of the terrace.

"Hi-de-ho!" shouted Miss Phipps, running madly towards it.

The niece of the blue-haired American lady—the girl who had found Hermia and Helena making sense the night before—was standing on the steps just outside the theatre precincts.

"I hope I didn't interrupt," she said politely. "We were just passing along and saw you. I wanted to thank you for telling us Miranda Lee was to stay at the Hathaway. We dined there tonight and had a wonderful view of her."

"Thank *you*," said Miss Phipps fervently. "Must go—bell has sounded—see you tomorrow perhaps!" she cried, rushing away to the safety of the crowded foyer.

"I almost wish I were *not* in Stratford," mused Miss Phipps sadly. "If I were in Southshire, I could go and tell my suspicions to Inspector Tarrant. But to a strange policeman they would sound altogether too nebulous. In fact, they *are* altogether too nebulous," concluded Miss Phipps with a sigh, picking up her book again.

She was lying in her comfortable bed at the Hathaway, trying to soothe her harrowed nerves by reading (as usual) a detective story. She had taken care to keep amongst the crowd on leaving the theatre and had thankfully joined the Laire group as they approached the hotel. Linda was at her worst, snapping and whining, but Miss Phipps would gladly have put up with someone far worse than Linda, for the sake of the protection her company afforded. Besides, poor Linda's self-confidence had been badly shaken by her glimpses of Miranda Lee, and Miss Phipps, from previous encounters with critics of her novels, knew just how painful the experience of mauled self-confidence could be.

"Oh, well!" sighed Miss Phipps again. "It's not my affair, I suppose."

In her mood of frustration she

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found herself dissatisfied with the development of the plot in the novel she was reading.

"These heroines, really!" exclaimed Miss Phipps.

The telephone at her bedside rang.

"Yes?" said Miss Phipps.

"Is your car a Cardinal in two shades of rose, madam?" enquired a male voice politely, giving her the registration number.

"Yes."

"Then I am afraid I must ask you to come down and move it, madam," said the voice. "A London gentleman who has to leave very early tomorrow morning is unable to get his car out."

"I left plenty of room," began Miss Phipps.

"No doubt, madam. But other cars have probably moved in since. We have so much trouble with cars parked in the yard, madam, you wouldn't believe it."

"A few well-placed white lines would eliminate your difficulties," said Miss Phipps grimly.

"Now that's an idea worth consideration," said the voice.

"Oh, very well, I'll come down. But you'd better warn the London gentleman that it may be five minutes or so before I get there. I'm in bed—I'll have to get dressed."

"I'm exceedingly sorry, madam," murmured the voice.

Miss Phipps banged down the receiver and climbed out of bed. She surveyed herself with distaste in the mirror and began reluctantly to undo the night preparations she had so recently completed. She took the net from her hair, wiped the cream from her face, threw off her nightgown, put on a dress and coat, pulled on an easy pair of shoes, and extracted the car key from her purse. She still looked pretty frightful, she decided, but sufficiently reputable to glide through the Hathaway passages without causing too much surprise.

"Luckily the weather is fairly balmy," she thought, emerging from her room.

At the foot of the stairs, in the otherwise empty hotel foyer, sat Michael Lynn, alone and smoking moodily.

"Linda's been so hateful he dislikes the thought of going to their room," thought Miss Phipps compassionately. "Hullo, Michael!"

"Miss Phipps!" exclaimed Michael, springing to his feet. "Is there anything wrong?"

"I must look even worse than I imagined," reflected Miss Phipps sardonically. She explained the circumstances.

"Why not let me move the car for you?" suggested Michael, crushing out his cigarette. "I'm familiar with Cardinals."

"Why, how kind of you, Michael I should be most grateful," said Miss Phipps, handing him the car key. "Leave the key at the reception desk, will you? I can pick it up tomorrow morning."

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She returned to her room, performed all her night preparations for the second time, lay down in bed, and again took up the mystery story.

"I have no patience," she said, rereading a paragraph, "with these heroines who are deceived by false messages. It's a gimmick for getting the heroine into the hands of the villain, which is hopelessly out of date in the modern detective story and should never be used again. No sensible woman would ever be deceived—"

"Good Lord!" cried Miss Phipps, springing out of bed. "And I've sent Michael!"

She snatched a coat, some shoes, her electric torch, and flew downstairs. The foyer was still empty, with no clerk at the reception desk, though voices could be heard coming from a room labelled *Manager's Office*.

Miss Phipps rushed through the passages to the back entrance and burst out into the long yard, a place now almost completely in shadow, filled with darker shapes. She switched on her torch and groped among the cars to her Cardinal. She knelt down.

Yes, she was right.

The false message gimmick, stale though it was, had proved successful.

A body lay on the ground, from whose head blood was slowly oozing. Owing to Michael's kindly disposition and Linda's fretfulness, however, the body belonged not to Miss Phipps, as the assailants had planned, but to Michael.

"Help! Help!" shouted Miss Phipps, rushing back into the hotel. "A man has been murdered!"

The door of the manager's office was flung open and a confused cluster of people tumbled out. There was the plump balding manager himself; there were Miranda Lee and her Maurice; there was a uniformed police sergeant, massive and rather Dobgerryish in appearance; there was a lanky gingerish young constable; there was a very neat, lean man in plain clothes whom Miss Phipps, from her long experience of her friend Robert Tarrant, recognized as a Detective-Inspector.

"Quick! Telephone for an ambulance! Michael Lynn has been attacked and wounded."

The reception clerk flew to the telephone, the sergeant to the hotel yard.

"Is he dead?" enquired the smooth tones of Maurice.

"I don't know," said Miss Phipps. She felt fairly certain that Michael lived, but thought a good fright would hasten action.

"Can this have anything to do with the other matter?" said the manager anxiously.

"What other matter? Yes, I'm certain it has," said Miss Phipps. "It was I whom they meant to knock out, not that poor boy Michael."

"Oh? Why?" said the Detective-

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Inspector, giving her a sharp look.

Miss Phipps was well aware that her appearance offered nothing reassuring to an Inspector's eye. She therefore became the celebrated novelist, put on her V.I.P. manner, and said firmly, "My name is Marian Phipps. I am a writer. If you will telephone the Southshire County police, Detective-Inspector Tarrant will vouch for my *bona fides*."

"Will you all please go in there and wait," said the Inspector, indicating the manager's office.

He herded them in and closed the door firmly. Miss Phipps at once opened it.

"Poor young Mrs. Lynn must be told," she said. "And her brother, Tony Harris. Though I think her friend Miss Ruth Armstrong will probably be more useful. They are all staying here."

"We shall attend to all that, madam," said the Inspector curtly. "Please go in there and wait."

This time he put the constable in the room with them. The man stood with his back to the door and glowered. Miss Phipps looked about her. The manager sat in the chair behind his desk, harassed and preoccupied; he was obviously wondering what on earth his directors would say to all this. Miranda Lee, looking beautiful and calm but weary, sank gracefully to a settee. Maurice seated himself beside her and lounged back against the cushions as if he had not a care in the world; yet it seemed to Miss Phipps' shrewd eye that the hands about his knee were too tightly clasped, as if to control any nervous quivering. Miss Phipps chose a seat near the door.

"May I know what was the other matter you referred to" she asked the manager.

He hesitated, but Miranda Lee said at once, "My diamond necklace has disappeared."

"Ah!" exclaimed Miss Phipps. "Did you lose it at the theatre??"

"Yes," said the manager quickly.

"No," said Maurice.

"Opinions differ, I see," said Miss Phipps mildly. "But you, yourself, Miss Lee—when did you first miss the necklace."

"Not till I went up to my room," replied the actress.

"Oh, I couldn't swear to that," said Maurice.

"When she was leaving the theatre, then? Could you swear to that?"

"No—how could I? It's not my habit to gaze at Miss Lee's jewelry —I prefer to look at her face."

"Very pretty," smiled Miss Phipps. Then she added mentally, "But a lie, I'll bet my Cardinal. He had a telephone call, which could have been from Mauve Shirt about me, and he was absent from Miranda's observation twice. It could have been he who telephoned me and struck down poor Michael."

At this point in her meditations the lean Inspector, followed by the massive sergeant, came in.

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"Now, madam," said the Inspector sternly to Miss Phipps. "I have checked with the Southshire police about you by telephone. Just to make certain that you really are Miss Marian Phipps, would you mind telling me the name of Detective-Inspector Tarrant's second child."

"But he has no second child!" burst out Miss Phipps indignantly.

"Just a little test question, madam," said the Inspector drily. "I think we may accept that you are, in fact, Miss Marian Phipps."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," said Miss Phipps, ruffled.

"Will you now please give us your account of this affair. Why did you say the attack on Mr. Lynn was meant for you? Why did you say the attack was connected with Miss Lee's necklace?"

"Well," began Miss Phipps, taking breath for her story.

"Please be brief," Miss Phipps," put in the Inspector.

"I shall be thoroughly succinct," said Miss Phipps, annoyed, "because you, Inspector, have no time to lose if you wish to apprehend the thieves and recover the necklace. Briefly, then. Yesterday I was passed on the road by what is known as a Gospel van, manned by two people who looked like knaves if ever I saw knaves. The van had on its back some very familiar biblical texts, wrongly and ungrammatically quoted. And this alleged van had a far greater speed than such a van would normally have. These three observations led me to believe that it was in fact not a genuine Gospel van but a powerful car, camouflaged.

"At the theatre last night I saw one of the van men, whom I nicknamed Mr. Mauve from the colour of his shirt. Mauve, a ratty little man of a type one would not usually find in an expensive stall, was completely ignorant of Shakespeare; he mistook that delightful fool Bottom for a sharp shrewd fellow. Unfortunately I let him know that I had seen him on the van that afternoon. Mauve returned late and breathless to his stall after the interval. This morning I saw the van parked secretly in a field, some distance from the town but close to the river. When I attempted to approach it the driver became menacing. This evening I saw Mauve again in the theatre, which struck me as curious."

"Why?" barked the Inspector.

"He was completely ignorant of Shakespeare."

"Even an ignorant man might, to lessen his ignorance, attend two consecutive performances."

"Of the same play? Highly improbable," said Miss Phipps confidently. "It occurred to me that Mauve's procedure on the previous evening had been a sort of *rehearsal* for an incident which was to occur tonight. The incident, whatever it was, had been carefully planned—Mauve's two stalls must have been

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booked some time ago. And a controlling intelligence superior to Mauve's seemed clearly indicated.

"I followed Mauve onto the terrace. I saw him in an attitude that suggested he was dropping something over the railings. I spoke to him. He resented my presence violently. I thought he was about to attack me, but I was saved by the unexpected approach of American acquaintances.

"Clearly Mauve disliked my presence. Why? Because I, and I alone, knew that the man who dropped something over the railings was connected with the van. Therefore, it was dangerous to him that his connection with the van should become known.

"Presently Mauve's accomplice, a man with an educated voice—not Mauve or the driver—telephoned me pretending to be the hotel clerk and lured me down to the dark car park with a message asking me to move my car. Michael Lynn, in the kindness of his heart, poor lad, went out to do the errand for me and was struck down in mistake for me. Why? Again, because it was dangerous that Mauve's connection with the van should become known, and so any possibility of evidence from me must be eliminated.

"Why was I dangerous? Obviously because the over-speedy, falsely-religious van was nothing but a fake. Yet if it were only a means of escape, it was a clumsy fake, for it was so very noticeable. Therefore the appearance and size of the va were necessary to the plan.

"It then occurred to me that th van could hold a small boat. O hearing of the theft from Miss Le it further occurred to me tha Mauve had dropped Miss Lee' necklace over the railing of th empty terrace to someone in a boa below."

There was a dumfounded silence

"But I didn't see any horrid littl man like this Mauve near me in th theatre," objected Miranda Lee.

"No? I think somebody else stol the necklace and passed it t Mauve," said Miss Phipps. "Th man with the smooth voice, yo know. And then off the necklac went, over the railing, and dow the Avon. So that if the theft wer quickly discovered and a searc made, it wouldn't be found any where in the theatre."

"It's a strange story," said the In spector.

"It's fantastic," said Maurice with contempt.

"You'd be surprised how fantas tic human beings are, sir," said th Hathaway manager, shaking hi head with a knowing air. "In m profession we learn to be surprise at nothing."

"It hangs together, however,' continued the Inspector, disregard ing their interruptions. "And part of it are susceptible of proof. Yo might get that van traced, Ser geant."

"It probably won't be a van now

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The boat and the text-painted boardings will have been left in the field, and a fast car will now be on its way to London," said the manager sadly.

"Perhaps," agreed Miss Phipps. "But Mr. Mauve Shirt and his driver think they've knocked me out, you know. So there's nobody about, they think, to put two and two together. And then again," she added with a sly smile, "I gave Mauve such a start on the terrace that I rather believe he may have missed his aim, and the necklace may now be at the bottom of the Avon. What were you saying?" she enquired of Maurice, who had given an irrepressible start.

"I said nothing," replied Maurice hoarsely.

Everyone looked at Maurice—the Inspector and Sergeant in sober calculation, Miranda Lee from wide horror-stricken eyes, the manager with a sudden impish grin. But there came an interruption. A wild scream sounded from the foyer outside. So wild, so agonized was this scream that everyone in the room sprang to their feet and the Sergeant threw open the door.

Miss Phipps ducked nimbly under his arm and ran out. Two policemen were carrying Michael to the ambulance on a stretcher. His body was limp beneath the grey blanket, his eyes closed; nevertheless Miss Phipps, to her ineffable relief, saw that he lived, and that the comparatively natural colour in his cheeks indicated his injuries were not as serious as she had feared. Linda was kneeling beside the stretcher, impeding its progress and trying to raise Michael's head.

"My poor child!" said Miss Phipps, raising her from the ground. "You must let them take him quickly to the hospital."

Linda threw herself into Miss Phipps' arms.

"I can't bear it! I can't bear it!"

"You love him very much," said Miss Phipps softly, taking the opportunity to make a point on behalf of Michael's future happiness.

Linda raised a tear-stained face, which to Miss Phipps' surprise was contorted, not with grief but with terror.

"I can't do without him," she said.

Miss Phipps sighed. Even at this moment, she reflected sadly, Linda could experience only a selfish motion—she merely dreaded the thought of life without the continuing kindness, the ever-present protection of her husband.

A hoarse breath at Miss Phipps' shoulder caused her to turn. It was Maurice who had followed her and who now tried to edge out of the door.

"I thought so," said Miss Phipps. "And where are you going, pray? To the van and your two accomplices?"

With an angry exclamation Maurice shoved her roughly aside and ran down the street.

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"Inspector!" cried Miss Phipps, tottering backwards. "Catch him!"

She might have spared her breath, however, for the whole scene had already burst into violent action. Police whistles shrilled. Several constables seemed to appear from nowhere and sprinted off at the double. Late homeward-going revellers were scattered on the street outside the hotel, and threading his way through these delayed Maurice's headlong course. The lanky constable put on speed and gained on him. Miss Phipps, riding along sedately in the ambulance with Michael and Linda, witnessed the capture.

"You've nothing on me," cried Maurice angrily, his artificially smooth tones now rough and sharp. "I haven't got your blasted diamonds."

"What about this blood on your shirt-sleeve." said the Inspector, arriving at the appropriate moment. "Assault and battery, that's yours, my man—at the least."

"I adore Stratford!" exclaimed Miss Phipps, as from a bend in the road she caught a last glimpse of the church which housed Shakespeare's bones.

Stratford had certainly done her proud on this occasion. The mystery was solved, the three villians were in custody—Maurice, it turned out, was a jewel thief well known to the London police, Mauve Shirt and Big Ears equally well known for petty offences. The diamond necklace had been dredged up from the bottom of the Avon. Michael and Linda were reconciled, and Linda had an anecdote of a great theatrical star on which she could live for the rest of her life. Linda had something more tangible, too.

"I shall never forgive myself for being the cause of your husband's injuries, Mrs. Lynn," Miranda Lee had said to Linda. "I'm more than thankful he is convalescing so well. I'm so very deeply indebted to him."

"I don't see that *you're* indebted to him," objected Linda, nevertheless delighted. "Miss *Phipps* is indebted to him, but not *you*."

"But if he had not gone out to Miss Phipps' car, Miss Phipps would have been attacked and knocked unconscious, and then the thieves would have escaped. They would simply have raked my necklace from the bottom of the river and gotten away with it, and Maurice would still be an accepted member of my intimate circle," said Miranda with a sad little smile. "I understand that hospitalization is free in this country, or of course your husband's medical expenses would be my responsibility. As it is, you must allow me to offer you some token of my gratitude. I say you, because from what I have seen of you and Michael, I guess your husband would prefer you to benefit rather than himself. Now is there anything which would give you special pleasure?"

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"Well," said Linda, colouring happily and looking at Miss Phipps for guidance. "Well! I don't know *what* to say, I'm *sure!* I don't know whether Michael would—"

"Some small personal thing, perhaps," suggested Miss Phipps. "Something which has belonged to yourself personally, Miss Lee."

Miranda smiled her beautiful, world-famous smile.

"Take this," she said, unclasping from her wrist a platinum and sapphire bracelet. "Yes, Linda, I insist . . ."

So the mystery had been solved and the necklace restored and the thieves apprehended and Miranda Lee rescued from a scoundrel and Michael and Linda made happy. And all this had been accomplished with the air, curiously enough, of the greatest poet of all time.

"Soul of the Age!" declaimed Miss Phipps. *"The applause! delight! the wonder of our stage! My Shakespeare, rise!* And take a bow," added Miss Phipps, pressing the accelerator.

"Sweet Swan of Avon . . ."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JEROME BUXTON**

TITLE: ***A Point of Curiosity***

TYPE: Crime-Detective Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Newspaperman Merrick had not been back to his old neighborhood for 15 years, and he thought he'd never go back again. Then the ticker stuttered out the story: cop killer trapped in abandoned warehouse . . .*

HE WAS MERRICK OF THE HERALD—by-line, Thomas B. He'd never climbed to where Pegler or Winchell or Considine was, and he never would. He was just Merrick of the *Herald,* and he was in the city room shaping a feature story around the suicide attempt of a fading Hollywood star when word came of the young hoodlum trapped in the abandoned warehouse on Deacon Street over by the river.

He crossed the room and checked the local ticker for details: *. . . Frank P. (Franky) Sarvo . . . male, white . . . 24 . . . long criminal record . . . wounded Patrolman John Arvey during machine-gun stickup of gas station . . . still armed . . . extremely dangerous . . .*

His story forgotten, Merrick left the building. Force of habit marched him surely and directly into the Press Bar across the street, where he sat down at a table and ordered a drink.

The bar was empty—all the brave journalists having rushed forth to serve—so Merrick was alone as he made wet rings with the bottom of his scotch glass and mulled over something that had popped into his mind when the word had come.

A pigeon, a vaguely remembered pigeon. A damned strange thing to recall, he thought.

But that's how it is sometimes. As you go along from year to year trading your time for experience, your memory gets cluttered with all

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sorts of unimportant things: a snatch of dialogue from the interview for a job you once wanted and didn't get; the brushing of a girl's hand across your cheek while they played *Stardust* at some long-ago dance. And when one of these memory imps bobs up—if you happen to be meticulous about such things—you have to search around for a complete picture or you might not sleep that night from wondering.

That's how it was with Merrick, except that he didn't have to dig as deeply as usual. With the pigeon as focal point, the tableau formed swiftly—on the sidewalk in front of the old warehouse on Deacon Street. The image of an unimportant incident.

And a name—Franky Sarvo. A boy defending his pet.

Merrick was no stranger to that section of town. He'd been born down in the River Ward; he knew its every chipped brick, its whole dreary skein of dirty streets and wind-swept corners; he'd fought in its alleys and hidden in every foul underpassage from Liberty Street to Mimosa.

How many years had passed since his last visit to the old neighborhood? Fifteen? An exact count wasn't important. There had been enough. So far as elapsed time was concerned, the child out of his memory and today's trapped hoodlum could be the same person.

Merrick pondered. Sarvo would be making his stand in the northeast corner of the old shell where bastion walls still marked a fortresslike room built for beer storage during Prohibition days. Its entrance was too narrow for even a beer keg, thus making direct attack almost impossible

A cozy fortress indeed, but Merrick wondered whether Sarvo or the police were aware of a back entrance—an underground tunnel used in the old days for receipt and delivery of contraband. After Repeal, the tunnel had been forgotten. Rediscovered by accident, it had become headquarters of the River Ward's junior elite—The Secret Six. Merrick smiled and wondered what had ever happened to the other five . . .

Then he went back to the more intriguing question: were his two Franky Sarvos the same person? It was a nice possibility to consider over a scotch, so Merrick ordered another one and considered it.

Hagan of the *Mirror* interrupted him. Hagan slouched in, muttering casually obscene clichés about the newspaper business, and sat down opposite Merrick. He signaled the waiter, who folded a *Racing Form* and moved toward the bar.

Hagan, a good reporter, had all the appearance of a tough marine drill sergeant and the unhibited, almost brutal manner that went with it. More than once, Merrick had caught himself resenting Hagan. This may have sprung from the fact

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that Hagan was Merrick's opposite and was thus free from any inner struggle between ideals and reality. Perhaps Merrick envied him.

Hagan looked at Merrick and growled, "You on vacation?"

"I'm doing Sunday features."

"Sarvo ain't a feature?"

"Not for Sunday-morning breakfast. How's it going over there?"

"He's wedged in like a pickle under a mattress. Captain Aiken's on it. Taking his time. Doesn't want to explain how it was to a lot of widows. Squeamish that way. Where the hell's my gin?"

The waiter brought it and Merrick said, "Maybe Sarvo'll give up."

Hagan scowled. "I kind of don't think so. He's on a high crest with a tommygun in his mitts. Hot off a chase from a stickup. With his background I think he'll ride the excitement right into the morgue."

Suddenly Merrick decided not to have another drink because, as he looked into his glass, he saw Franky Sarvo crouching there, cuddling a submachine gun, training it savagely on the whole world. He could possibly have discounted that part of the vision, but there was more: a pigeon sat on the barrel of the gun holding out a broken leg as though asking what society was going to do about it.

This last jarred Merrick. He pushed his glass away and said, "Portrait of a young man kneeling."

"What'd you say?"

"A painting for the Louvre."

"You out of your ever-lovin' skull?"

"A debatable point," Merrick said, and got up from his chair. He'd stayed away from the River Ward for years. That last visit was to have been the end of going back, the last of looking into a tenement's smashed-out windows in search of an alibi for wasted talent, an end of lying to himself. So he'd never returned.

But now there would be another trip into the old neighborhood. Perhaps this one would be truly the last.

Merrick went out, got into a cab, and gave Jefferson and Klondike Streets as his destination. The driver shifted gears, then hesitated. "Hey—that's where they've got that cop-killer holed up."

"The cop isn't dead yet."

"But that's where they've—"

"Not quite. He's two blocks away. This'll be outside the ropes. You can make it."

"All right. If you say so."

The driver's faith was not misplaced. He was able to drop Merrick at the address—on the southwest corner beside what had once been a vegetable store but was now someone's home, as attested by a dirty sheet hanging over the front window.

The streets were deserted except for a woman who hung out a third-floor window screaming across the rooftops for "Sammy." She would probably be screaming

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for quite a while, Merrick thought. No doubt Sammy was down on River Street—as close to the scene of action as the police would allow—and he wouldn't be home until the fun was over.

A siren moaned nearby as Merrick faded back into a narrow, refuse-filled areaway. Halfway to the alley, he dug one foot into debris until he'd uncovered a boarded-over opening at the base of one of the brick walls. It could have passed for a window and was of a size to admit a man or a keg of beer.

Merrick had no trouble with the rotted planks. In fact, they proved less of a barrier than the mat of cobwebs behind them.

Originally, the tunnel had been a sewer. Abandoned in the gaslight days, it ran underground across two short blocks and passed under the warehouse to the river. Ingenious minds of the Twenties had converted it into a passageway by bricking up the river end and cutting through into the warehouse proper. Merrick would have only to follow his nose.

He got down on his knees, remembering that it had been easier when he was a boy, and backed into the opening until his feet touched the two iron straps along which they used to roll the kegs. He snapped on his cigarette lighter and peered into the darkness ahead. Actually, he didn't need much light—only enough to reveal any danger spots in the ancient ceiling.

He remembered exactly where the tunnel angled slightly to the right, and he paused there for a few moments. The area widened somewhat at this point, forming a sort of cave. This had been his gang's headquarters. Merrick remembered the conclaves, the oaths taken, the crimes planned. Once a dog had been stolen and held for ransom. But no one came forth to pay and the pup had liked the place so well they had made him a member. Merrick smiled and moved on.

Soon the passage began functioning as a sound tunnel and he could hear the rising and falling wail of a siren, the shrilling of a police whistle, a snatch of unintelligible words flung above the rumbling pitch of activity out on River Street. Merrick got the feeling that Captain Aiken had yet to make his move. How long would Aiken wait?

A sense of unreality—almost a fantasy mood—had come upon Merrick. This was shattered as he tripped over a dislodged brick and fell heavily. Rubbing a numbed cheek, he asked: Merrick, what the hell are you doing here, anyhow? What kind of an idiot would crawl through an abandoned sewer trying to verify a point of no great importance one way or another?

Merrick struggled to his feet and moved forward.

A ventilating shaft had been used as the terminus of the tunnel, the break-through point standing in the south wall of the contraband

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room some twelve feet above floor level. A hand lift had been used to raise and lower the kegs. It had been long since removed, and now the opening could easily be mistaken for an oversized chimney vent.

Merrick approached it as quietly as possible. He covered the last few feet under the sound of an amplified voice blaring in from River Street: "Sarvo! You haven't got a chance. Give yourself a break. Leave your gun in there and come out with your hands up. Why commit suicide?"

A stream of profanity was touched off in the room below Merrick. He pushed his head over the protecting brick ledge and saw a slight-bodied young man with tousled black hair.

The young man stood facing the narrow entrance of the room. He was swaying back and forth like a dazed bear just out of hibernation. But his voice was shrill to the point of hysteria. "Ain't no cop got the guts to come in and get me." He patted the gun and laughed. "Come on, you slobs! Make it a big payday!"

There was a lull. Merrick braced his hands against the bricks and called, "Pipe down, kid. You're nowhere near a score."

Sarvo whirled and brought the gun up. Merrick shoved back hard against his hands as a shower of slugs snapped at the bricks.

Sarvo screamed. "You dirty son! Come on! Stick your puss out! I'm not through yet."

"Quiet down. I haven't even got a gun."

"What the hell you doing up there? How'd you get there? Who are you?"

"Name's Merrick. Not a cop. I'm a newspaperman."

"Who's with you?"

"Nobody."

"You nuts or something? Crawling down a chimney—sticking your head out of a hole in the wall. You want to get killed?"

"Not me. I just want to ask you a few questions."

There was a pause, after which Franky Sarvo's voice came at a lower pitch. "You on the level?"

"On the level."

"And you didn't bring no cops?"

"No cops."

Sarvo considered this. "Stick your skull out again."

"Not me."

"Then what's the point?"

"You're too high and happy. You're looking for a target."

"I ain't looking to kill no newspaper guys."

"We can talk this way."

A sudden rumble of activity sounded from River Street. Sensing Sarvo's attention riveted on the entrance, Merrick again pushed his head over the lower ledge of the opening.

The activity subsided and Sarvo turned and raised his eyes. Merrick watched tensely for a movement of

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the gun. Sarvo's grin was like skin pulled tight over a death's-head. He lowered the machine gun. "You guys would dig your way into hell with a teaspoon for a story."

Merrick was interested in Franky Sarvo's surprising disinterest in the tunnel entrance. But then, perhaps it wasn't surprising. Perhaps Sarvo was a complete fatalist. Merrick had a theory that criminals went to the electric chair because they were incapable of imagining beforehand what it would be like. Perhaps Sarvo proved this theory by being interested only in danger at hand rather than potential.

"Yeah, you're news all right," Merrick said, "but you know the old saying. When you're a headline today, they use you to wrap fish in tomorrow."

"I ain't laughing. What do you want—the story of my life?"

"You haven't had much of a life yet. Actually, it's a point of curiosity with me. I lived in this neighborhood when I was a kid. I knew about this tunnel."

Sarvo squinted at the opening. "Looks like I should have brung a ladder."

Merrick could find no fear in Sarvo's voice, but the young gunman's keyed-up state made it hard to separate the real and the assumed.

"I used to wander back into the old neighborhood," Merrick said. "The last time was around fourteen years ago, and something stuck in my mind."

"What thing?"

Merrick was thankful for the lull outside. "There was a kid backed up against the wall out front on River Street. Four or five other kids had him trapped and were moving in on him."

"What was the beef?"

Sarvo had moved out of comparative shadow and stood where a shaft of light cut down on him from one of the two windows three floors up—just below the room's ceiling, which was also the roof of the building. The light more clearly outlined the thin, taut neck that looked too fragile to support the rugged head.

"This kid had a pigeon. He was defending the hell out of it. It had a broken leg, and the kid was ready to bleed for the bird."

Merrick was struck by the ridiculousness of his own words, of this whole adventure. What had seemed so amusing and nostalgic when viewed through a scotch glass now had all the markings of immature maundering.

But it apparently did not strike Franky Sarvo that way. He turned his eyes upward and regarded Merrick with what was almost a natural smile. "You helped the kid out."

"There was nothing to do. My showing up helped him. He told me his name was Franky Sarvo."

Outside, the wail of a siren heralded an approaching police car. Or possibly fire equipment, Merrick thought. He was pretty sure how

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Aiken would shape his strategy—sure, too, that time was short.

Franky Sarvo was occupied with genuine wonder. "You crawl in here on your belly just to tell me that! You're as crazy as they come!"

"Maybe. But as long as I'm here I want to know. Was it you?"

Sarvo had momentarily forgotten his desperate plight. He was enjoying himself—baiting Merrick. "Suppose it was. What difference does it make to you?"

Merrick considered that. What difference *did* it make? He tried to define the urge that had brought him here.

"I talked to that kid. He was all right. He had the guts and the nerve to stand up and fight for something he believed in, even if it was nothing but a broken-legged pigeon. He didn't have any stickup artist in him. He wasn't even the beginning of a cop killer."

Sarvo laughed and said, "Daddy, you got it bad," but his mind was elsewhere. "That damned pigeon! I found it in the alley. I put a splint on its leg."

So Merrick knew—the answer to his question, and something more: that he couldn't go away and leave it like this.

He forgot the law. He forgot Aiken. He remembered only a ten-year-old boy defending a wounded pigeon. "Listen, kid," he said. "I can get you out. I can—"

Sarvo sneered up at him. "Me turn yellow? Chicken out? Grow up, daddy. When they come, I blast."

"You haven't got a chance. Aiken just called for a hook and ladder. You know how they'll take you. They'll lob tear gas in those high windows and you'll be done."

"I won't be done. Tear gas or not—when they come I blast."

Merrick knew he spoke the truth. "And they'll cut you to pieces. Aiken won't fool around. Look, kid. Drop that gun and take a running jump up this wall. I'll grab your wrists. Let me haul you out of this!"

Sarvo was looking at the windows above—at something more than the windows—and Merrick raised his eyes.

A pigeon.

It had come to rest on the sill high above. It peered down into the trap, its head cocked to one side. Its chortling coo was audible.

Then, as Merrick watched, Franky Sarvo raised his gun. He raised it with a casualness that told of movement without thought, of action from instinct.

There was a quick burst of slugs from the muzzle and the pigeon flew to pieces in a flurry of blood, flesh, and feathers.

Sarvo grinned and turned almost dreamily to Merrick's roost. "That damned pigeon. Uh-huh. I made a splint for his leg."

There was silence. Sarvo peered at the opening. "Hey, daddy. You still there?" There was no answer, and Sarvo's face turned vicious.

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"Listen, you stupid clunk! You trying to pull something?"

Then his attention was diverted by the amplified voice of Captain Aiken: "You've got two minutes more, Sarvo. Two minutes. Then we're coming in."

Franky Sarvo faced the entrance in spread-legged defiance. He pointed the machine gun savagely at the whole world. He yelled, "Come and get me, copper." Then he flung quick words over his shoulder. "Watch this, daddy; This is going to be good."

But Merrick was gone . . .

He sat in the Press Bar, ignoring his drink. The ice cubes had melted it into a glass of faintly tinted water when Hagan came in. Hagan dropped into a chair and growled at him, "Two tugboats smacked each other in the Narrows. One went down."

"How did the River Street thing finish?"

"He got another cop before they killed him."

"And that's that."

Hagan peered across the table. "You weren't here. You go out on something?"

"Uh-huh. Went down to the River Ward. Went down there looking for a kid with a pigeon."

Hagan grinned. "You find him?"

"No. Didn't find him. He was gone."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN BINGHAM**

TITLE: ***Murderer at Large***

TYPE: Crime and Detection

LOCALE: England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Bradley's car seemed to have developed trouble and the only house in sight was Lark Cottage. Next thing Bradley knew, he was enmeshed in a night of terror.*

THE WEATHER WAS FOUL. IT HAD been snowing, off and on, for some days, but during the last few hours the temperature had suddenly risen, and with the departure of the cold had come the rain, pitting the smooth snow, causing it to fall with soft rustles and sighs from the branches in the coppice which surrounded the cottage on three sides.

Bradley switched off his engine in the black-velvet shadows of the trees opposite the little gate. He went up to the gate and saw that it bore the name "Lark Cottage." He saw, too, the soft lamplight gleaming through the chinks in the curtains of the front room.

It had been dark for two hours now. A blustery little wind had arisen, sweeping in chilly rushes across the moors, driving the rain before it, and plunging into the little hollow in which the cottage lay.

There was no other habitation in sight.

Bradley unlatched the gate, walked up a narrow path, and knocked on the door. For a few seconds he heard nothing. Then came the sound of footsteps, but they did not come to the door. He heard them pass in front of the door, then begin to ascend uncarpeted stairs.

For a few seconds he stood listening, hearing the water drip from the eaves. A sudden gust of wind and rain, stronger than usual, caused him to turn up the collar of his raincoat.

Suddenly, somewhere above him,

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a window was opened. The gust of wind died away, and in the silence that followed, a woman's voice said, "Who is there? What do you want?"

"You don't know me," he replied. "I am sorry to trouble you."

"Who are you?"

"You don't know me," he repeated. "My name is John Bradley. It will mean nothing to you, I'm afraid. I got lost, and now I've developed car trouble. I see there is a telephone line to your cottage. I would be most grateful if I could use it. Naturally I'll pay you for the call."

He looked up as he spoke. He could see the pale blob of her face in the darkness, peering down at him through the half-opened lattice window. For a second or two she said nothing. Then she said, "Wait a minute. I'll come down."

He heard her close the window, and the sound of her footsteps on the stairs again, and the noise of the door being unbolted.

He followed her into the little hall, and then into the living room. The room was a curious mixture of dark oak furniture, solid and enduring, and cheap modern bric-a-brac.

In a far corner a small Christmas tree, obviously dug from the garden, stood in a red pot. A little girl, aged about ten, was decorating it with bits of silver tinsel. As he came in she held in her hand a small Fairy Queen, made of cardboard, and painted with some silvery, glittering substance.

She was fair-haired and pale, and looked at him gravely, uncertainly—poised, as though prepared to drop everything and run at the first harsh word.

Unhappy, thought Bradley; thin and unhappy, and none too fit. Aloud, he said, "That's a pretty tree you have."

For a second, warmth crept into the child's face and lit up the gray eyes, and she seemed about to speak. Then, as the woman spoke, the child thought better of it, and the face assumed again its former cautious expression.

"The 'phone's on the window sill."

Bradley swung round and looked at the woman. She was about thirty-five, tall and sallow, with dark hair and eyes, the hair brushed back severely from the forehead. But for the fact that she was thin and that her face wore a harsh, embittered expression, he would have considered her handsome for her age.

Bradley said, "I suppose Skandale is the nearest town? Can you recommend a garage there?"

She shook her head. "You won't get a garage to come out at this time of night." She paused and added, "I doubt if there's even a garage open, now, in that dump."

"You are not from these parts?"

She shook her head again and said, "I come from Brighton."

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Bradley said, "You must find it a bit different up here."

But she was not listening to him. She was standing rigid, her head slightly on one side, as though she were listening. Her neck, her arms, her legs, her whole body was stiff. Bradley, glancing at her hands, saw that they were clenched and pressed to her sides.

But the child was different.

The child's face was suddenly flushed and eager. She had stopped trying to fix the Fairy Queen to the top of the Christmas tree, and had turned her head toward the window, toward the front of the house and the garden path, and the gate through which a man would normally approach the cottage.

"Did you hear anything, Mummy?" the child asked.

The question seemed to break the tension. The woman said sharply, "Julia! Either get on with your tree or go to bed—one or the other."

The child turned back to her tree, but almost at once turned her head quickly to the window.

Bradley heard the click of the gate, too. So did the woman. The noise came during a momentary lull in the wind, so when the woman said it was the storm blowing the gate nobody believed her, and the child ran to the window and looked out, thrusting the curtains aside, and peering into the night, kneeling on the window seat, nose pressed against the pane.

Bradley said, "You are expecting somebody? Well, I won't bother you any longer. I'll be on my way. Maybe the car will last a mile or two, and I'll do the last stretch on foot. I take it this road leads to the main road to Skandale?"

The woman was staring toward the window, toward the child. Bradley thought: The child is eager, expectant, but the mother is afraid. At last she said, "It is at least ten miles to Skandale. You would do better to stay here, Mr. Bradley, and catch the early-morning bus from the end of the lane. I can give you a bed."

"But if you are expecting somebody—"

"Nobody is coming."

There was a flurry of movement on the window seat, as the child Julia swung round and cried, "But, Mummy, it said on the wireless—"

"Julia! Come, it's time for your bed."

She went to the window and took the child by the hand, and jerked the child off the window seat and toward the door. At the door she paused a moment and said, "You are quite welcome to stay the night. Julia and I share the same room, and I will make up the bed in the small room for you."

Bradley caught the strained, almost eager undertone in her voice, and knew that she wanted him to stay; knew that she was afraid, and wished for his company in the house; afraid, even though as yet she had not said what she feared.

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"Very well," he said. "I will gladly stay. It is very kind of you."

He watched her lead the child out of the room, and heard them mount the stairs, and the sound of voices in an upper room—the woman's sharp and scolding, the child's plaintive. Then he went quickly to the window and looked out.

The light from the room was reflected by the snow so that he could dimly see the garden, the path, and the gate. But there was no sign of anybody.

He had not expected to see anybody.

He lit a cigarette and wandered slowly round the room, glancing at the books in the bookshelf near the fireplace, at the cheap water colors on the whitewashed walls.

On a table near the window stood a small silver tray. He picked it up and read the inscription in the middle, written in the impeccable copybook handwriting peculiar to such things:

To Fred Shaw on his Marriage—
From his Pals at the Mill

He replaced the tray and moved to the fireplace, noting the inexpensive china ornaments, the walnut-wood clock. In a light-oak frame was a picture of a plump-faced man with fair, receding hair. In the bottom right-hand corner were the words: *To Lucy, with love from Leslie.*

He wandered on, looking for something which he somehow knew he would not find; looking for the usual wedding picture, the wedding picture of Fred and Lucy Shaw.

He was not in the least surprised not to find it, not in the least surprised to find no trace of Fred Shaw at all, except for the silver tray, and that, after all, was worth money. No trace, that is, until he came to the newspaper lying on the dark oak sideboard, and saw the double-column headlines, and read the text about Frederick Shaw, and how the police were scouring the countryside for him.

Frederick Shaw, aged forty-two. Escaped from Larnforth Prison.

Shaw the murderer, reprieved because of what Home Secretaries call "Just an element of doubt"—and serving a life sentence, with nine-tenths of it still to run. Shaw, the former overseer, respected in all Skandale, who once or twice a year got a little befuddled with beer; who was known to be on bad terms with his uncle, the Skandale jeweler.

Good-natured old Fred Shaw, who never could explain how his cap and heavy blackthorn stick were found beside the battered body of the jeweler—or even what became of the money they alleged he had stolen.

Bradley put the paper down quickly when he heard the footsteps on the stairs. Too quickly. As he turned away, the big pages slipped over the side of the polished sideboard. So that when Lucy

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Shaw came into the room, she saw it lying on the floor, and said, "So now you know."

"Yes," said Bradley, "I know."

She stood in front of the fireplace, massaging one hand with the other, staring at him with frightened eyes. A tall, gaunt woman, with a wide mouth. The harsh expression had left her face. He saw her lips quiver.

"What are you scared of, Mrs. Shaw?" asked Bradley.

"I'm not scared. I'm not at all scared. Why should I be?"

"That's what I was asking," said Bradley. He moved to the door and said, "I'll go and get my suitcase out of the car."

He went into the hall and out the front door and down the garden path to the car. She heard the sound of the car door being slammed. On the way back he paused by the front door. Then he came into the hall and put down his suitcase.

When he came into the living room he said, "Come outside a minute, will you?"

She swung round.

"Why?"

"Did your husband—did Mr. Shaw use a walking stick much?"

"He always used one—almost always. He was a bit lame from a mill accident. Why?" And when he did not answer, when he only looked at her without saying anything, she repeated loudly, almost shrilly, "Why?"

"Well, come outside a minute," repeated Bradley, and groped in his raincoat pocket for his torch. She walked into the hall, and when she hesitated by the front door he said, "Come on, it's all right. I'm with you, and I'm six foot tall and quite strong."

The wind had lessened now, but the rain still fell; but softly, soundlessly, more in the nature of a moorland mist.

The snow was becoming soft on the surface, but was still deep, so that the footprints round the house showed up very distinctly in the light of the torch; so did the small ferrule holes in the snow on the left-hand side of the prints.

"I suppose he was left-handed," said Bradley, more to himself than to Lucy Shaw, and saw her nod almost imperceptibly. He raised the torch-beam a trifle and said, "See how he turned aside to look into the room? I suppose he saw me in there with you and Julia. I suppose he is waiting for me to go. Then he will come in and spend a few short hours with you, and perhaps take some clothes and money and go."

He heard a movement by his side, looked round, and found she had gone back into the house.

When he joined her in the living room, she was sitting crouched in a chair by the fire. Her sallow face had turned white. She was trembling violently.

Bradley said, "I think I had better go, after all. I'm keeping him out

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in the night rain. It's the police job to catch escaped convicts, not mine. I was a prisoner of war once. I've got a sneaking sympathy for them. Poor devil!" he added softly.

But she jumped to her feet, clutched him by both arms, and said shrilly, "You mustn't go! Please don't go!" A thought struck her, and she added, almost in a whisper, "Before the gate clicked—you remember?—the child and I heard a sound. I think it was his hand, perhaps his fingernail on the windowpane, as he looked in through a chink in the curtains."

Bradley said, "I'm going, unless you tell me why you are afraid."

He pushed her from him, and she went and stood by the fireplace. After a while she said, "He thought I should have done more for him at the trial. He said he was with me at the time of the murder, and I should have said so too. But he wasn't, so I couldn't say it, could I? After all, you're under oath, aren't you, Mr. Bradley?"

"Yes, you are."

"So I couldn't perjure myself, could I? I mean, could I?"

"Men don't kill women for *not* doing something, Mrs. Shaw." He glanced at the grate. "The fire is dying and there is no more wood. Where is it kept?"

She looked up at him, fear in her eyes, and said, "In the shed near the back door. I can't go out there and fetch it. I'm not going out there alone."

"I'll fetch it. Just come to the kitchen door with me and show me where it is."

He opened the kitchen door, and she stood with him, and pointed to the shed, a few yards away. The rain still fell, still soundlessly. Somewhere some water was gurgling down a drain. Otherwise there was no noise, either in the the cottage or in the glistening bushes which edged their way to within a few feet of the back door.

He shone his torch, first on the shed, then on the bushes, and took a step forward: Suddenly he stopped as the bushes shook violently and snow cascaded from them.

Behind him he heard Lucy Shaw gasp and sob twice.

"It's probably only a rabbit," said Bradley, and walked toward the bushes. For a second he directed his torch at them, then made his way to the shed and gathered some sawn logs, and came back to the kitchen.

Lucy Shaw stood watching him, afraid to go back into the house alone, afraid to go out into the night with him. She kept passing her hand over her smooth hair, nervously, restlessly, staring out into the night with her black, dilated eyes.

The crash of the broken window, the broken living-room window, made her turn and scream. It caused Bradley to break into a run and it woke up the child. Brad-

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ley heard her calling, "Mummy! Mummy! What's that?"

Bradley carried the logs in one hand and with the other pushed Lucy Shaw into the house. He whispered fiercely, "Tell her I dropped a vase!"

When the woman had done so, they went into the living room and saw the stone with the piece of paper wrapped round it, lying among the shattered fragments of window-pane.

Bradley picked it up, smoothed out the paper, and saw, in capital letters, the word, *ADULTERESS*.

He handed it to Lucy Shaw and said, "He doesn't seem to think an awful lot of you, does he?"

The curtains were stirring in front of the jagged hole in the window. Bradley flung the logs down by the side of the fire and said abruptly, "I've had enough of this! You can sort it out yourself with your husband. It's no affair of mine."

She flung herself at the door, ashen-faced, and stood in front of it, barring his way.

"You can't leave me here—alone!"

"Who can't?" asked Bradley tonelessly, and watched the curtains billowing into the room as a sudden gust of wind struck them.

"Where are the police?" gasped Lucy Shaw. "Surely the first thing they do is to send men to watch an escaped convict's home?"

Bradley pointed to the telephone.

"Ring 'em up and tell 'em so. Ask them where they are," he said.

She ran to the telephone, lifted the receiver, and listened.

When a few seconds had gone by, Bradley said, "Perhaps the wire is down. Perhaps he's cut it—they do it in books."

After a minute the operator answered. Lucy Shaw held her breath for a few seconds to control her voice, to try to restrain the tremor. Then she said, "I want the police! Tell the police to come! This is Mrs. Shaw, Lark Cottage, Oak Lane, off the Skandale-Tollbrook road. Tell them it's—it's very urgent! My life is in danger! My—there's an escaped convict—a murderer—trying to get in!"

She replaced the receiver and stared at Bradley. He glanced at his watch and said, "They'll probably be here in half an hour. Three-quarters, at the most. You'll be all right till then, I expect."

He moved toward the door.

She did not move, unable to believe that he was really going.

"It's no business of mine," he pointed out for the second time. And when she clung to him and began to whimper, he said, "Don't be daft. He won't *kill* you for not perjuring yourself at his trial. He won't even kill you for carrying on with this podgy-faced, blond brute."

He waved toward the picture on the chimney-piece. "Maybe he'll black your eye. Maybe he won't even do that, once he's in the house

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and you can appeal to him. Men are queer that way."

But she clung to the doorknob, gaunt and unlovely, her black hair now in disarray. When he tried to move her hands, she suddenly flung herself against him, temporarily forcing him away from the door.

"It's worse than that," she said. "He knew Leslie and I were in love long before his Uncle was killed."

"So what?" said Bradley.

"You fool!" gasped Lucy Shaw. "Don't you understand what I'm trying to tell you? Leslie—Leslie Bond—traveler for Fred's firm, killed the old man, stole the money, and planted the evidence against my husband, Fred Shaw—and I knew he had done it!"

"Did you now?" said Bradley mildly. "And what's that to me?"

"I let Fred go on trial for it, and I'd have let him die for it, too—and he knows it. That's why he'll kill me if you go before the police arrive!"

"Fancy!" said Bradley, staring at her. "And your friend, Leslie—where is he?"

"He left the country, saying he would come back when the case had blown over."

"And will he?"

"No!" said Lucy Shaw bitterly. "Not voluntarily!"

As she spoke, her voice rose almost to a scream; and Bradley, watching the hatred flush her sallow face, knew that the end was at hand.

"Where is he? This Leslie," he asked abruptly.

"In Melbourne, Australia, and I'll damn well tell the police when they arrive!"

"You may be charged as an accomplice after the fact."

"What do I care!" shouted Lucy Shaw. "I'm not going to be done in tonight, nor twenty years from now, to save Leslie Bond."

Bradley said woodenly, "If that's the way you feel, and since you wish to make a statement, I don't mind telling you now that the police are here already."

She looked round. "Where?"

"Here," said Bradley, and put his hand in his raincoat pocket and produced his warrant-card. Almost automatically his voice became a routine drone as he continued, "I am Superintendent Bradley, of Scotland Yard. Sergeant Wood, I believe, has been listening outside that broken window. If you wish to make a written statement, I have some paper and a pen. I must, however, warn you that you are not obliged to do so, and that anything you say, or any written statement you make from now on, may be used in evidence against you. I should perhaps add that your husband was recaptured some three hours ago within a few miles of the prison."

"What with you skylarking

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around, trespassing, making footprints, and breaking windows," said Superintendent Bradley later to Sergeant Wood, "and me extorting confessions through fear and subterfuge, there's been enough crime committed at Lark Cottage tonight to fill a sheaf of charge sheets. Funny, how I always had an uneasy feeling about that case, even though I did collect the evidence which put Frederick Shaw in the dock. Lucky she didn't attend the trial and know my face."

He filled his pipe and added, "The kid'll be glad to be back with her father for Christmas. I reckon she hated her mother. So did I, if it comes to that," he said, striking a match.

"And so did I," said Sergeant Wood. "I was frozen stiff."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **DON KNOWLTON**

TITLE: ***For Sale— Silence***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *How J. Pennington Smythe, meticulous man of affairs, faced a crisis in his life— a clever and immensely readable story.*

MISS FORD, SAID J. PENNINGTON Smythe, "as I have repeatedly told you, I want three sharpened pencils ready on my desk. I see only two."

Miss Ford repaired the omission in venomous silence.

"When Mr. Cruikshank calls," Smythe continued, "tell him that I will see him at two o'clock sharp. I want two carbons of the letter to Talbot, one for the office file and one for my personal file. And you had better start a separate folder for the Hargraves correspondence, with a cross-reference under B for Bolton, Hargraves' president. And I would appreciate it, Miss Ford, if you could complete each day's filing before leaving the office, instead of letting it ride over until the next morning, which is a most untidy habit. I shall be in the sales conference in Mr. Jacobs' office until noon—"

The phone buzzed. He picked up the receiver.

"J. Pennington Smythe speaking."

"Mr. Smythe," said a voice, a dead-toned and disagreeable voice, "I think you will wish to see me at my office at two o'clock this afternoon."

"Who is this?" asked Smythe.

"Never mind who I am," said the voice. "My office is in Room 713 at the Tower Hotel. I shall expect you at two."

"Is this a joke of some sort?" Smythe demanded, somewhat nettled.

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"No joke."

"Then you will please tell me who you are and the nature of your business with me."

"You will learn all that," said the voice, "when you see me at two o'clock."

"This conversation may as well be concluded right now," snapped Smythe. "Of course I'm not going to—"

"Oh, yes, you are," broke in the voice. "You'll be here. Just recall where and under what circumstances you spent the night of June 17th."

There was a silence.

"Room 713, Tower Hotel," said the voice—and hung up.

For some moments J. Pennington Smythe sat very still.

"Miss Ford," he said finally, "when Mr. Cruikshank calls, tell him that unfortunately I will not be able to see him this afternoon."

Save for a desk, a typewriter, and a steel filing cabinet, Room 713 was an ordinary hotel room. Behind the desk sat a large bald-headed man with a slightly bent nose and insolent gray eyes.

"Come in, Mr. Smythe," he said. He did not get up or offer to shake hands. "Sit down. This office is not as imposing as yours, but it is sufficient for my business. Now may I introduce myself: my name is Hamilton Briggs."

Smythe took a chair across the desk. He was a slim, trim figure—accurately clipped mustache, knife-creased trousers.

"I assume," said Smythe, "that Briggs is not your real name."

The eyebrows of the gentleman behind the desk raised slightly.

"Your assumption is correct," he said, "but immaterial. I operate under the name of Hamilton Briggs, and as such am known at my bank and in all my financial transactions. And as you have no doubt already gathered, we are concerned here with a financial transaction."

"How much do you want?" asked Smythe, with disconcerting directness.

"Oh, come now," replied Briggs, "don't rush things. In order to set a fair price we must appraise the value of the merchandise. As you have already deduced, and it took no great perspicacity to do so, the merchandise I have for sale is silence. So it would seem pertinent to acquaint you with the extent of my knowledge."

"Go ahead," said Smythe.

"You are forty-seven years old," continued Briggs, "you are married, you have no children, you are reasonably fond of your wife but, to put it delicately, you are not enamoured of her. She has been of great value to you because her family are heavy stockholders in the company which employs you, and they have pushed you forward. You are now vice-president in charge of finance, and in view of pending

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retirements you are slated, within a matter of weeks, to become the next president of the company. Am I correct?"

"Correct," confirmed Smythe.

"On the afternoon of June 17th last," Briggs went on, "you and a female whose name it is unnecessary to mention registered as man and wife at a hotel which it is needless to name, and there spent the night. I have some substantiating photographs. Would you care to see them?"

"I would not," answered Smythe. "I can recall the incident without benefit of visual aids. I am, however, curious as to how you learned we were there."

"I do not reveal trade secrets," answered Briggs. "To continue. It is my assumption that if your wife, and the directors of your company, discovered the facts which I have so briefly summarized—and saw the pictures—you would not have a snowball's chance in hell of becoming president of the company."

"Your assumption is right," answered Smythe. "That was why I said at the outset—how much do you want?"

Hamilton Briggs smiled coldly.

"It is a pleasure," he said, "to do business with a man like you. I want ten thousand dollars."

J. Pennington Smythe lit a cigarette.

"I do not have ten thousand dollars," he stated.

"That is the usual opening gambit," commented Briggs. "It probably is a lie. If it is not a lie, it is just too bad. Because if I don't get the ten thousand dollars—"

"Let me save you some breath," broke in Smythe. "You are about to say that if I am unable or unwilling to cough up that amount, you will approach my wife and/or my company and sell the information to them—which would of course mean ruin to me. You are about to urge me, therefore, to squeeze my assets to the utmost, promising that if I come through with ten thousand you will give me the photographs, and that your lips will then be sealed forever. Whereas I know, of course, that if you say that, you are a liar. You would simply keep the negatives of the photographs, and you would try to bleed me for the rest of my life. Look here, Briggs, why can't we be realistic about this thing?"

Hamilton Briggs seemed actually somewhat taken aback.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I don't have ten thousand dollars," said Smythe, "but if I get the presidency of my company I shall have a substantial earning capacity over, I hope, quite a period of years. Why don't we put our deal on a time basis? In that way you can realize a lot more than ten thousand dollars, and I can carry the freight. Let's call is blackmail on the installment plan."

Briggs shot a quick suspicious glance at Smythe—but Smythe's

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imperturbable blue eyes were expressionless.

"I don't like your choice of words," Briggs observed, "but your proposition interests me. Would you mind going into details?"

"It's very simple," replied Smythe. "If and when I become president of the company, my salary will be such that I should be able to pay you four hundred a month, over a reasonable period of time, without undue financial embarrassment. Furthermore, the amount per month would not be so large as to attract attention."

"It is a new approach," commented Hamilton Briggs, "but certainly worth exploring. What would you consider to be a reasonable period of time?"

"I have given considerable thought to that question," answered Smythe. "The first consideration has to do with life expectancy, the second with job duration. Bearing in mind the vicissitudes of health and of business, I do not think it would be reasonable to extend the arrangement for more than seven years. Besides, by that time, assuming that under my direction the company has grown and prospered, if my one-night peccadilllo of seven years previous were to be revealed to the directors and to my wife, I doubt very much that it would unseat me with either. So I will say, arbitrarily, seven years. Four hunrded a month, forty-eight hundred a year—over seven years that comes to $33,600. That is considerably more than $10,000."

For some time Briggs was silent.

"I know what you're thinking," Smythe went on. "You think there's a catch somewhere. There isn't. It's as simple as ABC. As things stand today, I can't pay you anything at all. It has taken every cent I've earned to keep up appearances. If I become president of the company, and I will unless you interfere, I *can* and *will* pay you. Four hundred a month for seven years."

"And if for some reason you are *not* made president?" asked Briggs.

"In that case," answered Smythe, "publish the pictures on the front page of the Sunday paper and to hell with you. I'm offering you a proposition. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," said Hamilton Briggs.

"Okay," returned Smythe. "Now all we have to do is to draw up the contract."

"How's that?" asked Briggs.

"I said," repeated Smythe, "that now we have to draw up the contract."

"Contract?"

"Of course." said Smythe. "You wouldn't go into a deal of this importance, would you, without a contract?"

"Well, I must say," observed Briggs after a pause, "that I don't know of any precedent—"

"Mr. Briggs," Smythe stated, "I am very meticulous in my methods of doing business. In fact, my secre-

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tary, Miss Ford, thinks that I am overmeticulous. But it is for that very reason that I have succeeded as financial vice-president; and I believe it is that quality in my personality that makes me the obvious choice for the presidency. I do not like loose ends. I insist on being precise. You, Mr. Briggs, have something to sell. I am buying. The amount involved runs into a good many thousands of dollars. In the ordinary course of business no prudent man would enter into a deal of this size without a written agreement. Let's get this down in black and white, for your protection as well as mine, so that there can be no possible misunderstanding between us."

"Somehow," said Briggs slowly, "I don't like the idea of a written document—"

"Why not?" asked Smythe. "It pins us both down, doesn't it? You say you won't talk, I say I'll pay for seven years, and how much. Let me sit down at your typtwrriter —if you'll be good enough to hand me a couple of sheets of paper and a carbon—"

While Smythe typed, Briggs lit the wrong end of a cigarette and swore.

"Here we are," said Smythe, a few minutes later, rolling the paper out of the machine. "Duplicate copies. It's dated today, with places for both our signatures. Each of us keeps a copy signed by both. Here is what it says:

"The undersigned Hamilton Briggs hereby agrees to reveal to no one the whereabouts and the identity of the overnight female companion of the undersigned J. Pennington Smythe on the afternoon and night of June 17th of this year, and to hold concealed and undisclosed the photographs of Smythe and companion taken on that occasion.

"In consideration of and in payment for such silence and concealment, J. Pennington Smythe agrees to pay Hamilton Briggs the sum of $400 per month for seven years, payments starting as of the date of this instrument.

"Provided, however, that if the facts hereby sought to be concealed become known to the employer and/or the wife of J. Pennington Smythe, this agreement is null and void and of no effect."

"What's that last paragraph for," demanded Briggs.

"It's merely a statement of fact," explained Smythe. "Obviously, if my company and my wife should learn about my little affair from some source other than yourstlf—and we cannot rule that out as a possibility—you would no longer have any grounds for blackmail."

"I wish you would not keep using that word," Briggs complained. "What you are buying is protection against the possible results of your own folly. It is really a form of insurance."

"That's right," agreed Smythe.

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"And did you ever hear of a *verbal* insurance contract? I say we should button this up properly. Let's both sign, and get it over with."

"Now just wait a minute," Briggs objected. "Isn't there some danger to having this in written form?"

Smythe laughed.

"Isn't there some danger," he said, "in having a file, as you have, filled with photos and written records of various people's misbehavior which, if discovered, would disclose your profession? Does it increase your risk to add this paper, with our signatures, to what you already have in your steel cabinet?"

"I didn't mean that," Briggs explained. "I was thinking about you, not me. What are you going to do with your copy of the agreement?"

Smythe stared at Briggs with wide eyes.

"What do you think I'm going to do with it?" he asked sarcastically. "Show it to my wife? Present it to the Board of Directors? Put it in my safe deposit box, where it would be found if I died? Do you think I'm going to take any chances on this document being found as the result of my own carelessness? Believe me, Briggs, my copy of the agreement will be put away where J. Edgar Hoover himself couldn't find it. I'm no fool."

"But I still don't see," Briggs insisted, "why you want a written contract."

Smythe sighed.

"I have told you," he said. "It's my way of doing business. And I'll tell you something else. An honorable man does not welsh on a contract. Once we sign this, each one of us can depend on the other living up to its terms."

"I still don't like the idea," grumbled Briggs.

Smythe stood up.

"On second thought," he said, "maybe seven years is too long. Perhaps we'd better have just a verbal agreement, and then I won't feel bound by contract and I might be able to squeeze out of it somehow. And besides, you wouldn't have my signature on a document which is tantamount to a confession by me of the truth regarding my reprehensible behavior."

"Oh, sit down!" barked Briggs. "I can't figure you out, but I'll go along."

There was silence while both men signed both copies of the agreement. Briggs put his copy in the steel file behind his desk; Smythe folded his copy and put it in his pocketbook.

"Well, that's that," observed Smythe, looking at his watch. "If you'll excuse me, I must get back to the office. You'll be hearing from me."

"I certainly expect to—every month," returned Briggs, with a grim smile.

A week later Hamilton Briggs sat at his desk, opening his morning mail.

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The phone rang. He picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"This is J. Pennington Smythe speaking. I think you will wish to see me at my office at two o'clock this afternoon."

"What's the idea?" demanded Briggs.

"You will learn that," returned Smythe, "when you see me."

"Look here, Smythe," Briggs said indignantly, "our business has been concluded. I'm not going to—"

"Oh, yes, you are," broke in Smythe. "You'll be here. Unless you prefer a visit from the police."

There was a silence.

"Twelfth floor, Peabody Building," said Smythe, and hung up.

"Sit down, Briggs," said Smythe. He did not get up or offer to shake hands. "Miss Ford, we shall excuse you for a few moments. Mr. Briggs and I wish to have a private conversation."

Miss Ford closed the door with slightly more than her usual emphasis.

"Will you please tell me," Briggs began, "what the devil—"

"Please!" said Smythe. "It will save time if you let me do the talking. There are certain facts of which you should be apprised."

He leaned back in his desk chair and put his fingertips together.

"First," he went on, "you should know that my wife, at the time it happened, was fully informed of the June 17th incident at the Tower Hotel. I told her myself. In fact, it seemed simpler—and tidier, if I may say so—to provide as corespondent in my wife's divorce suit, soon to be instituted, the woman I shall marry as soon as the divorce is granted."

Hamilton Briggs stared.

"Second," continued Smythe, "the directors of my company are confidentially aware of my marital situation, and furthermore, I never had any intention of accepting the presidency of the company even if they offered it to me. I am resigning, and going into business for myself. This is my last day in this office."

"You damned liar!" shouted Briggs.

"Quiet!" cautioned Smythe. "I do not think you wish this conversation to be overheard. Third: under the circumstances our mutual agreement is, of course, null and void, as provided under the terms of its final paragraph."

Briggs rose hastily.

"I wouldn't start anything if I were you," Smythe observed quietly. "There are plenty of people just outside this door. Now to my fourth point, which has to do with the police."

Briggs sank back into his chair. No longer did he wear an air of insolent assurance. Smythe reached into his desk.

"I have here," he said, "a photostatic copy of our agreement, plus a photostatic copy of my check to

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you for $400, endorsed and cashed by yourself. That evidence alone, if handed to the proper authorities, would be sufficient, if I felt so inclined, to keep you out of circulation for a long time."

"What do you mean if you felt so inclined?" asked Briggs slowly.

"I would *not* be inclined to make any disclosure to the police," explained Smythe, "if you and I can come to an understanding."

Briggs unleashed a string of profane invective.

"How much do you want?" he asked.

"I believe we have previously reviewed a matter of this sort," Smythe replied. "I do not wish to inflict any hardship on you. I assume, however, that a man of your talents has a substantial income, and that without undue embarrassment you will be able to pay me the sum of $400 per month for seven years, starting today."

Briggs glanced toward the door.

"I wouldn't try to make a break for it," advised Smythe. "A phone call from me would bring the officers to your hotel before you could get back to it to destroy your records. I doubt if you would enjoy being a fugitive from justice."

"Okay," said Briggs bleakly. "I suppose you want to get this down in black and white—"

"Good try, Briggs," said Smythe, grinning. "No, my passion for reducing a contract to precise written form seems somehow to have evaporated. This is strictly a gentleman's agreement. There will be no record of it. I shall repeat this conversation to nobody, and if you repeat it I shall deny it under oath. But of course you will not repeat it, because in so doing you would be incriminating yourself. I shall place the vital documents—the negatives and the photostats—in a place known only to myself, and at the end of seven years I shall destroy them. You will mail the $400 to me monthly in cash, and as I suggested a moment ago, the first payment is due today. I presume that a man of your calling usually carries with him what is known in the trade as a roll?"

Silently Briggs took out his pocketbook and handed Smythe eight fifty-dollar bills.

"Pardon me if I do not give you a receipt," said Smythe. "Miss Ford! You can come back in now."

As Miss Ford took her place at her typewriter, Smythe politely showed Hamilton Briggs to the door.

"Goodbye, Briggs," he said. "As you remarked the other day, it is a pleasure to do business with a man like you."

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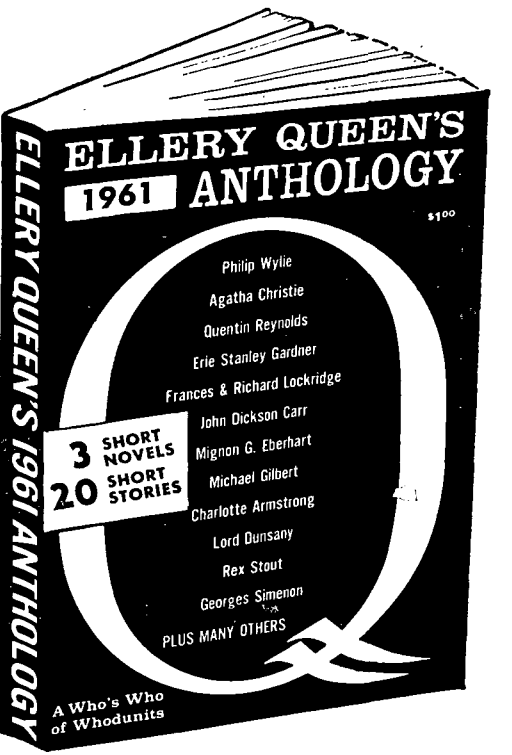

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